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April, 1990

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MYSTERY

MAGAZINE



**THE  
THURSDAY  
CLUB**

A Case of Manners...  
and Mortality

by Carol  
Beach  
York

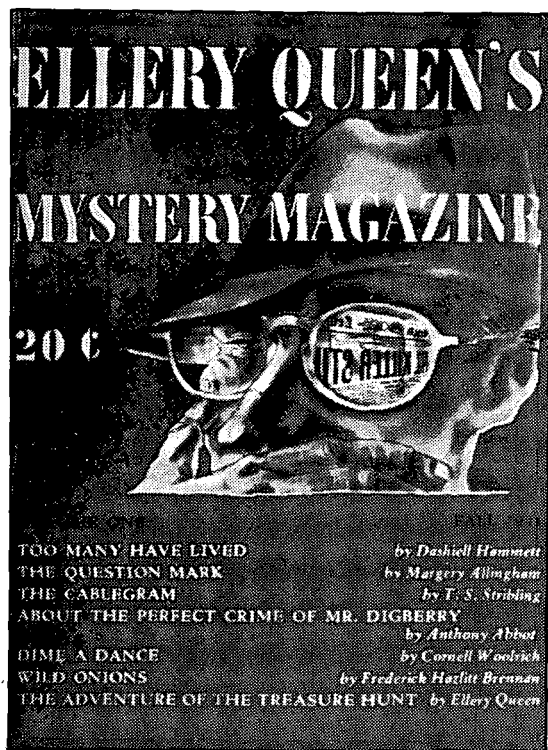
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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

**W**e are pleased in this issue to welcome four authors new to us. Carol Beach York, whose "The Thursday Club" is our cover story, has heretofore focused on young adult and juvenile suspense novels; we are delighted with her first foray into suspense stories for adults. James Finnegan, author of "Night of the Coon," makes his debut in fiction of any sort in these pages; he is otherwise engaged in freelance technical writing, a far cry, we imagine, from the powerful moods and emotions he generates in his story.

Rex Miller, author of yet another strong suspense tale, "Dead Standstill," has written several novels and other short stories; his novel *Slob* (Signet) was nominated for the Bram

Stoker award as Best First Novel of 1987.

And Nina Kiriki Hoffman, author of "Pouring the Foundations of a Nightmare," is a widely published writer of fantasy and horror tales.

A note about an author we have published before, or at least about his current story: As you may have noticed, we rarely bring you reprints of any kind (except for the Mystery Classic), especially those that have been recently published elsewhere. We are making a special exception this time, however, with Isaac Asimov's "Northwestward." The story was published last year in *The Further Adventures of Batman*, edited by Martin H. Greenberg, but to everyone's dismay, some

(continued on page 14)

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FICTION

# The Thursday Club

by Carol Beach York



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Well, *really*, it was too exasperating! Grace Warren hung up the telephone with a brusqueness she hoped Agnes noticed. It served Agnes right. The woman ought to know her excuses for not coming along with Grace to the symphony rehearsal were not acceptable. "In the morning, Grace?" Agnes had said, when the invitation was extended. "You've got tickets to a symphony rehearsal . . . Oh, darling, I'm afraid not. I have a hairdresser appointment at one o'clock, and you know I don't like rushing from one thing to another . . ."

It was not the first time Agnes had been annoying. It was all in Grace Warren's notebook, and now here was another entry to add. She sat down at her dainty cherrywood desk, set to face windows with a view of the lake and the curving sweep of Lake Shore Drive with its steady flow of traffic. It was a fine April morning, a cause for rejoicing after a dreary Chicago winter. Sunlight sparkled on the passing cars, on the expanse of blue water where already early-season boaters had ventured. Sails caught the breeze; a small yacht rode by.

Nearly seventy now, Grace Warren had been a widow for some years, a wealthy widow. The room around her was a

room of blue velvet sofas, tasseled pillows, tasteful oil paintings in ornate frames, a blue and rose Persian rug on the parquet floor. From farther back in the spacious apartment came the sound of the maid vacuuming a bedroom carpet.

Grace took the notebook from the back of the center desk drawer. It was a small, dark green leather book with a gold-tooled design. She kept it in the back of the drawer as a sort of semi-hiding place; but it did not really need to be hidden: the entries were so cryptic no one else would have been able to make much of them.

She turned to the page headed A.C. for Agnes Coburn and wrote only *Sy. reh. ref.* She would know that meant symphony rehearsal refused. The Agnes page was getting quite long. Grace pinched her lips together with disapproval.

A slighting remark about Grace's not looking well in lavender. *Lav.*

A suggestion that Grace might look better with a new hairstyle. *Hair.*

Lack of interest in Grace's crystal collection. *Crystal.*

A refusal to go with Grace to the Gauguin exhibit on the ground of "crowds." Well, *of course* there were crowds: That was what the exhibit was *for*. *Gauguin.*



Tardy for bridge. (That appeared three times.) *TFB*. Tardy with no good excuse. Agnes Coburn thought the whole world waited upon her slightest whim.

Yes, Grace decided, reviewing these indiscretions and irritations of A.C., it was time to do something. She tapped her pen gently on the desk top and watched the boats on the water as she thought over what form her revenge would take. Anonymous letter? . . . No, better not that. . . . A surprise gift of some dreadful thing? . . . No, not that either. . . . Phone calls, perhaps. Yes, that might be just the thing. Not the "heavy breather" type of calls—that would frighten Agnes, and Grace certainly didn't want to frighten her. She merely wanted to annoy her. Late night calls that would jar her from sleep for a few nights ought to be just the thing.

There were three telephones in Agnes's apartment, one right beside her bed, so there was no way Agnes could sleep through the ringing.

Grace would start tonight. She didn't mind staying up until the wee hours to do it; she would sleep in the morning. She had already lost interest in the morning rehearsal at Orchestra Hall. The only other person she could think of to invite to the rehearsal on such

short notice was Marian Willoughby, and Marian Willoughby was such a dull sort. Grace felt overwhelmed with weariness just to think of her. Marian was only tolerable in a group, best seen only Thursdays when The Club met.

The Thursday Club had once been five. Five elderly ladies who met every Thursday afternoon for lunch at exactly one o'clock in the Drake Hotel's Oak Terrace dining room (formerly and fondly remembered as the Raleigh Room; but things were always changing).

Although the decor and name had changed, the location of the dining room at the corner of Oak Street and Michigan Avenue provided a charming view of both lake and city at the point where both were most prestigious.

Ila Franzen had started the Thursday Club. But she was gone now. A tall woman who wore large jewelry and was fond of martinis. She always ordered two for lunch, which Grace Warren felt was at least one too many.

The Club had come on Thursdays with such unfailing regularity that they were known to hotel staff who could remember when there had been five members. The passage of time had taken its toll; now there were only three. For Tilly Finch was

gone too, a fat, fluttery woman but a dedicated music lover. She had had her faults, of course, but if she were here now she would love going to a symphony rehearsal with Grace. Grace sighed to think of it; it was really so exasperating.

Grace made her decision about the phone calls on Tuesday afternoon. Both that night and the following night she rang Agnes Coburn's number at midnight and then again at one thirty. She felt this spaced the calls so that Agnes could fall asleep between and thus be rudely wakened twice.

Agnes had never married, and she had surely never missed a husband, Grace Warren was certain, not with all her inherited family money. Agnes, a thin, high-strung woman, had lived a life of ease, albeit a solitary one. But of course she had grown selfish and inconsiderate. The thought of waking her, alone in her apartment in the middle of the night, gave Grace a sense of just retribution.

To Grace's delight, when the Thursday Club (all three) were settled that week at their usual table on the appointed day, Agnes brought up the subject of the late night phone calls first thing.

"And I haven't had a decent night's rest for two nights because of it," she complained, ig-

noring the menus and ice water and basket of rolls that appeared upon the white linen tablecloth in the usual refined and civilized way everything was done at the Drake.

"It's a wrong number." Marian Willoughby drew off her gloves and dropped one, unnoticed, to the floor. Her expression was her usual vacuous one, and Grace could tell that Marian was, as always, slow to grasp the point of things.

"A wrong number? So many times?" Agnes sniffed at this suggestion.

Grace hugged herself secretly in her mind. She kept her face pious with concern. "No heavy breathing?" she inquired, just to get into the conversation.

Agnes shook her head quickly, casting her eyes upward. "No, thank God. I couldn't *stand* that. When I pick up the phone, all I hear is someone hanging up at the other end."

Marian had missed her glove and was examining the table, her handbag, her lap. She was a colorless woman who had never tinted her hair or worn nail polish. Even her eyes were colorless, the palest pale gray.

Without Ila's martinis, the drink order was modest when the waitress came. Marian Willoughby never had anything but iced tea. Grace sometimes

had white wine, but not always; she didn't feel it was good to get into too much of a habit. Agnes Coburn liked sherry; today, however, she hesitated, then ordered scotch on the rocks. "My, my." Marian patted her wispy gray hair and tried to sparkle a little at such daring, but she only looked foolish and Grace had to turn away to spare herself the embarrassment of seeing Marian being so silly.

"I feel I need something strong," Agnes said crossly. "My whole life is being disrupted."

"Oh, I would hardly call two nights a disruption of your whole life," Grace chided. She extended her plump, beringed hand to Agnes and gave her a kindly pat on the arm. "No doubt it was all some phone line mixup, and it will probably never happen again."

But of course it did happen again. The very next night, and the next. Then, although Grace continued to call, no one answered. She pictured Agnes listening to the rings with a stubborn refusal to pick up the receiver. Well, let her listen then. Grace let the phone ring on and on—counting to thirty, thirty-five, forty rings before she hung up. On Sunday afternoon she phoned Agnes to ask, with gentle concern: "Have your mysterious calls stopped?"

"I don't know," Agnes said.

"My maid said I should just turn off the phones at night, so that's what I do."

Grace sent a withering arrow of hatred straight to the heart of the maid—ah, she knew her well, a small shifty-eyed thing, probably stealing silver on the side.

"But is that wise, dear, turning off the phones?" Grace forced herself to remain calm and concerned. "What if someone should try to reach you for an emergency during the night?"

"Who?" Agnes wanted to know.

"Well, I don't know." Grace was diffident, apologetic. "There must be someone."

"Well, if there is, they'll just have to wait until morning."

Agnes had always been a self-willed person. Grace put down the phone and sighed. There was no point now in staying up late to place the calls if Agnes's phones weren't ringing. It was another item to record against Agnes in the notebook, and Grace took it from the desk drawer thoughtfully. *Off Ph.*, she wrote. She enjoyed her secret code. Life must have some private pleasures.

She considered what else she might do. She reconsidered the anonymous letter, the surprise gift. But rejected them. She still had not thought of anything to

plague Agnes with when it was time once again to attend the Thursday Club at the Oak Terrace — and then, fortuitously, Grace found there was no need to think of further strategies.

Agnes and Grace arrived in the hotel lobby at the same time, Grace defiant in lavender, her favorite color no matter what Agnes said. Her small, plump feet were snug in taupe shoes; her handbag matched; her antique gold necklace had been purchased on a trip to India when her husband had been alive. God rest his soul.

Agnes arrived in a green silk suit and small green hat. It was almost May now. Warm, exciting. Michigan Avenue streamed with people. Flags flew, traffic whistles blew. It was a glorious day. Doormen at the Drake entrance greeted her as she swept in. She brought with her a visiting niece named Stephanie . . . a pretty, young woman of thirty-five, athletic-looking. Grace appraised her at once as having thin legs, skin that tanned well in summer, and curly hair, all things life had unfairly deprived Grace of.

"Darling"—a brush of lips against cheeks as the ladies greeted each other and then proceeded up the hotel staircase to the Oak Terrace Room.

Marian Willoughby was waiting on the sofa at the res-

taurant entrance. Dull and prim, her ankles crossed, looking every bit her seventy-two years. Small pearl earrings were her only decoration. She hoisted herself up, handbag flopping at her wrist, when she saw Grace and Agnes coming. She didn't realize at once that the slim young woman beside them was actually with them.

"My niece Stephanie, visiting for a few days," Agnes explained as a hostess came to lead them to their table. "We've been to Bloomingdale's. Too much light, I think, but Stephanie loved it . . ."

A fourth chair was provided at the table for Stephanie.

"Where is your home, dear?" Grace asked as the busboy deftly placed rolls and ice water.

"Dayton, Ohio," Stephanie answered, laughing. "I love coming to visit Aunt Agnes in the Big City."

"Tsk, tsk," Agnes said modestly, as though she alone had created Chicago.

"I had a cousin who lived in Dayton," Marian Willoughby said. "But he's dead now."

Further such stimulating conversation followed the drink order of iced tea, white wine, sherry, and a diet cola for Stephanie. (One might have guessed, thought Grace, who could never stay on the diets her doctor was always prescrib-

ing for her; the scale was her enemy.)

"I'm going to leave my phones on tonight," Agnes remarked unexpectedly, midway through her sherry.

"Leave them on?" Marian Willoughby was lost, as always. But Grace was palpitating with excitement. She leaned slightly toward Agnes and tried to look interested but casual.

"I've had my phones off at night since those dreadful calls started." Agnes folded veined hands and brought Marian up to date. Then she added, with an air of bravura, "Tonight they all stay on. Stephanie says the calls have probably stopped and I should set my mind at rest."

Instantly Grace forgave Stephanie for all her youthful attributes. She had persuaded her aunt to leave her phones on at night. Bless the dear girl.

"I'm sure you're right," Grace beamed at Stephanie. "Those calls have stopped long ago. A phone line mixup, that's all."

Menus were opened, consulted with the gravity given to world peace conferences.

"I think I'll have the shrimp salad," Marian Willoughby said. "Or, no—perhaps the cold salmon plate."

The waitress arrived before final decisions were made and waited with her pad and pen.

"Oh, I never know what to order." Marian lifted pale gray eyes and appealed to the waitress. Grace could hear the scorn of the waitress's thoughts: *What a trial they are to wait on, these little old ladies!*

However, in her secret self, Grace was in high spirits. Tonight, thanks to niece Stephanie, Agnes Coburn would leave her phones on. Lathered with all-night cream, perhaps with a chin strap, surely with a toe-to-neck modest nightgown, Agnes would return to her bed—in an exquisite room; Grace remembered it with approval: heavy drapes flecked with gold, ruffled pillow shams, a pink marbletop table at the foot of the bed.

"I think I'll have the broiled whitefish," Marian Willoughby said, changing her mind yet again.

She is the stupidest woman in the world, Grace thought to herself.

A week later, to the day, Grace Warren and Marian Willoughby attended the funeral of Agnes Coburn. It was an unusually chilly day for early May. A rough wind had risen during the night, driving the rain in slanting streaks across the beauties of the Gold Coast. Windows at the Drake Hotel's Oak Terrace Room were streaked with raindrops; pedes-



trians on Michigan Avenue hurried by huddled under umbrellas. Far away, at Rosehill Cemetery, Grace and Marian said goodbye to their friend of years, Agnes Coburn.

"Who would have thought . . ." Marian murmured in her bemused way. Her raincoat had the dingy, unfashionable look all her clothes acquired. One would never know she had money.

Leaving the cemetery, Grace spoke to the niece Stephanie, who had been with Agnes the night she died. Stephanie had stayed on to be at the funeral, and she looked splendid in a black linen dress—a color Grace could no longer wear with success. She took Grace's hand when it was offered and said in a soft voice, "Oh, everyone will miss Aunt Agnes."

"I'm so sorry, my dear," Grace responded, pressing Stephanie's hand. And she truly was sorry. Agnes had died when she lunged out of bed, seized the telephone which had once again wakened her in the middle of the night, and tried to throw it across the room. She was off balance or tripped on her gown, and fell forward, hitting her head on the edge of the marble-top table at the foot of the bed. Stephanie had run in from her own room when she heard the sound of the phone crashing against the wall.

But it was too late then to be of any help to Aunt Agnes.

Grace shared a chauffeured car from the cemetery with Marian Willoughby. Marian sniffled into her handkerchief—even now, after all was over. Grace turned away from her and watched the drops of rain chasing down the windows of the car. She was exasperated, of course. Now Agnes was dead, too. And Grace had never planned it that way. She had sent Ila Franzen the anonymous letter only when Ila's page in the notebook had grown too long to put up with . . . "A new lamp? Well, Grace, I can't come to see it today," after Grace had hunted three months for just that right lamp. . . . "Sorry, I'm busy for lunch tomorrow"—always excuses. And if Ila *was* free for lunch, she always took the best seat at the restaurant and left Grace looking at a potted plant or a wall.

The letter to Ila had been ambiguously worded to fit into some romantic idea Grace had of what anonymous letters were like. *Are you sure your husband doesn't know? I think he does. I'll tell him, just in case he doesn't know.*

With three widows and Agnes, the spinster, Ila Franzen had been the only married member of the Thursday Club. Whatever it was in her life she didn't

want her husband to know had remained a mystery. She had taken an overdose of sleeping tablets after receiving the letter.

Tilly Finch had been even more of a surprise. She had died instantly of a heart attack when Grace mailed her a dead mouse in a Neiman Marcus box. Grace had found the mouse quite by accident as she walked past the Armory on Chicago Avenue one evening on her way home from her volunteer afternoon at Northwestern Hospital. She had stood, silently observing the motionless mouse lying in a doorway beside a windblown cluster of autumn leaves. One did not expect rodents on the Gold Coast. Finally she had lifted it in her handkerchief—not without distaste—and put it into her handbag. At home,

in the privacy of her apartment, she had wrapped the mouse in tissue for Tilly Finch.

And now Agnes was dead, too.

Grace frowned out at the world that lay bleary and dull beyond the rainy windows of the funeral car. She had only wanted to irritate and annoy—but Ila and Tilly and Agnes had so overreacted. It would be another thing to write against them in the notebook. Except that now, of course, there was no point in that.

Grace was aware of a hand on hers, and she turned to meet the pale gray eyes of Marian Willoughby . . . whose page in the notebook was none too short.

"It's only the two of us now," Marian said, lifting a tissue to her nose. "It's only the two of us now . . ."

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*(continued from page 4)*

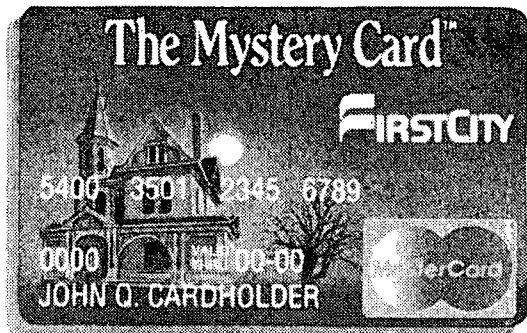
material toward the end of the story was omitted. Although that has been corrected in a subsequent printing of the book, some readers of earlier print-

ings will have missed getting to enjoy it. This, then, is the *complete* story, offered here in the hopes of disseminating it as widely as possible. (Besides, we like the story, too!)

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FICTION

# The Not-So-Big —Sleep—

—by Terry—  
—Black—

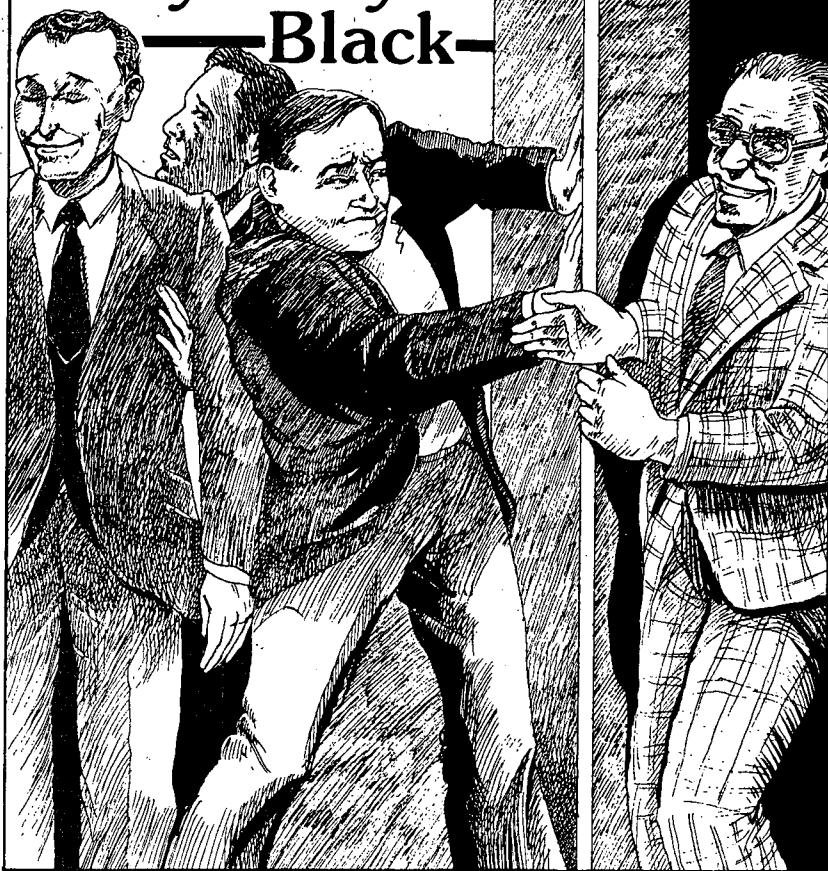


Illustration by Jim Ceribello

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LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
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**T**he first time Arnold Betz killed himself was bad enough. But *this*—what's a next-of-kin to do?

The whole fiasco began one sultry Sunday last June. I was fitfully dozing on Arnold's ninety-foot houseboat when the ship-to-shore phone rang.

"Hello?" I moaned.

"Phil Fowler here," said an irritating voice. Fowler always talked like he was narrating a newsreel, brash and loud and full of italics. "You'll never *guess* what's happened!"

"Surprise me."

"Arnold Betz *killed* himself last night! I'm the one who found the body. You're the only other person I've told." He lowered his voice. "As your attorney, I'm obliged to warn you that the fortune we've been sponging off is about to dry up like a dustbowl."

"Don't be silly," I blurted, groping for a Tylenol. "I'm Arnold's last living relative. If he takes the Big Swandive I'm next in line at the gravy trough."

"You *would* be," Fowler admitted, "if there was anything left to drain. But Arnold's been flirting with bankruptcy for years. As soon as the accountants make their fiscal postmortem, Betz Industries will go the way of the *Titanic*—and you and I will be sucking pavement in front of the

unemployment office."

"You mean we're *broke*?" I gaped out the nearest porthole at the sparkling waters of the marina, with its bobbing fleet of pleasure craft under a softly broiling sun. It seemed unfair to lose it all, just because of Arnold's faltering *joie de vivre*.

Suddenly a light bulb came on. "Hey, what about insurance? Arnold's got a policy at Continental Mutual, worth a cool five million—"

"No good, Dave," Fowler insisted. "They won't pay off on a suicide."

"Can't we call it an accident?"

Fowler hesitated. "I doubt it. But come on down and see for yourself."

**A**rnold's master bedroom smelled of gas.

"Nasty way to go," said Phil Fowler, smoothing the bedspread over Arnold's body. All the windows were wide open, but I couldn't help noticing the fragments of duct tape around every seam. This room had been airtight.

"He gave his servants the weekend off," Fowler summarized. "Then he sealed up the room and doused the heating jets."

"We can make *that* look accidental," I said. "All we have to do—"



"Not so fast," said Fowler. "Arnold must have got bored waiting to asphyxiate. I found *this* by his bedside."

He tossed me a plastic pill bottle, with ROY'S PHARMACY on the cap. According to the label, the pills were a potent barbiturate, sold only by prescription. The bottle, purchased only yesterday, was empty.

I slapped my forehead. "He gassed himself *and* took a lethal overdose?"

"Nope." Fowler groped in his pocket again. "He gassed himself, took a lethal overdose, and then shot himself in the head." He pulled a Colt .38 from his pocket. "With this."

For the first time, I noticed a brownish stain that had seeped up through the bedspread.

I sank into a chair. "Jesus, Phil. There's no way this is anything but suicide."

Phil didn't answer right away. When he did, his voice had a funny sound. "There's something we *might* do," he said softly. "I wouldn't suggest it if I weren't so desperate—"

"Suggest what?"

Phil opened his wallet and handed me a laminated card.

MORTAL COIL, INC.  
Reanimation Service  
"While-U-Wait"  
They Don't Walk—  
*You Don't Pay!*

"What the hell's *this*?"

Phil only sighed. "How'd you like to give old Arnie another crack at that insurance?"

Ordinarily, said the weird little guy, they didn't take checks. But for Arnold Betz, they'd make an exception.

"Just sign here," said the weird little guy, whose name-tag pegged him as Melvyn Peeble, Animatronic Technician. He was short and squat, with rodent eyes and colorless hair. "Better give us your phone number," he added, "in case we—well, just in case."

I raised an eyebrow. "What exactly do you *do* to the —uh —patients here?"

Peeble folded the contract and stuck it in a drawer. "Not to worry," he assured me. "It's all very routine—caulking the wounds, rewiring the nerves, that sort of thing. But here at Mortal Coil, we have one thing no other service offers."

"And what's that?"

He beamed. "Most deadshops just scoop out the braincase and hook up the nerves to an on-board computer. But not us. Wherever possible, we like to use the patient's own brain for the automatic functions: breathing, heartbeat, and so on. *Much* more lifelike, if you ask me."

"Hold it," I broke in. "What if Arnold's personality resurfaces? I don't want a suicidal zombie—"

Peeble winced at the word zombie—an industrial strength no-no in reanimation circles. "The man your uncle was is dead forever," he explained, as if to a child. "This is a mechanism, nothing more. But if you're bothered by superstition—"

"We'll take it," said Fowler, like a sucker at a used car lot. "Go ahead, Dave, pay the man."

**U**ncle Arnold had never looked better.

He was tall and suntanned with a winning half smile, like a minor politician or a man unjustly famous. We'd dressed him in his best suit, and I swear he looked healthier than when he was alive.

"Good morning, Uncle Arnold," I said.

Arnold looked at me and smiled. "Trix are for kids," he said.

Fowler snatched the remote control away from me. "You forgot to clear it," he snapped. He punched a button and Arnold tried again.

"Hi, Dave," he retorted. "Long time no see."

"This'll never work," I moaned. "Arnold will blow a

carburetor or something and we'll be indicted for insurance fraud."

"Nonsense," Fowler persisted. "Watch this."

At the touch of a button, Arnold sat down behind his desk, opened a sheaf of important-looking papers, and started signing them.

Fowler grinned. "We'll march him around awhile, let everyone see him—then run him off a cliff or something. It won't be murder because he's already dead."

"But what if someone tries to talk to him? He wouldn't fool a —"

"Knock, knock," said a voice.

I spun to find a sharp-eyed intruder in a plaid suit, extending his hand. "Marv Drexler," he said with a Colgate smile. "Continental Mutual Insurance."

My throat swelled, cutting off the oxygen like a crimped waterhose. But Fowler stepped in and pumped his hand. "Phil Fowler, attorney-at-law. What can we do for you, Marv?"

"It's time for Mr. Betz's semiannual checkup," Marv explained. "With five million at stake, we're *very* interested in the state of Arnold's health."

"It'll have to wait," said Fowler. "He's busy."

"Oh, it won't take long."

"Sorry," said Fowler, digging

in his heels, "but—"

He never finished.

For at that moment Arnold ambled over, draped an arm around Marv's shoulders, and said, "Nonsense. Never too busy for a checkup."

Fowler and I exchanged glances. This new setback was so astounding that we actually hesitated long enough for Marv to spirit Arnold out of the office. We bolted after them into the elevator lobby, only to find Marv standing all by himself.

"Mr. Betz had to visit the restroom," he explained. "He'll be out in a moment."

We heard the sound of glass breaking.

Hastily we excused ourselves and burst into the men's room. Someone had smashed out a window, revealing a square of twelfth floor scenery. A pigeon fluttered past. But the opening was too small for a suicidal high dive; Arnold had found another way.

We found him hanging by his belt, from the toilet stall cross-beam.

It was short work to get him down. He was dead, of course, but no deader than before—and his motorized enhancements were still working. He grinned as Fowler wrestled his belt back on.

"What's the matter with you?" I demanded.

"Softens hands while you do dishes," Arnold said.

Further discussion was forestalled when Marv came in to see if everything was all right. We said it was. Then we dragged Arnold back to the lobby just as the elevator went *ding!* and its doors slid apart.

Revealing an open shaft.

Fowler and I stopped in time, but Uncle Arnold would have plunged cheerfully basement-ward if not for our linked elbows. We hauled him back from death's door as Marv laughed nervously.

"Careful, Mr. Betz," he chided. "You're not in *that* big a hurry."

Finally we made it to the street. Marv was afraid we'd never get a taxi, but Arnold took care of that by stepping right in front of one. We bundled in, over the cabbie's objections—with my uncle wedged between us—and headed for the Saints of Perpetual Suffering Hospital.

Marv blathered on about the insurance trade, a subject even a catatonic would find boring. But it was easy not to concentrate; uppermost on our minds were the twin problems of how to get a corpse through a physical, and how to outfox the greatest death wish since Joan of Arc toasted her toenails.

We met no resistance at the hospital gates; Marv had pre-

registered my rich relation, and in no time we were hustled through a sterile corridor to an equally sterile waiting room where a cranky nurse served road tar in coffee cups. Arnold drank it hungrily, as if the vile brew might succeed where all else had failed.

"What *now*?" I stage-whispered to a sweating Fowler. "As soon as the doctor says, 'Next!,' we're jury fodder."

Fowler was mumbling about extenuating circumstances when a stethoscoped head poked through the doorway and bleated, "Next!"

Arnold didn't answer. We looked around, wondering if he'd tried to choke himself on a magazine, but he was only chatting amiably with a frail-looking woman in a pea-green peasant skirt. Marv tapped his shoulder and sent him into the examination room.

The next thirty minutes were the longest of my life. Nothing is worse than sitting on a hard-backed couch browsing through back issues of *National Geographic* and feigning indifference while your freedom—both fiscal and physical—hangs in the balance.

Still, all bad things must come to an end, and after a glacial interval the door swung open and out stepped Arnold.

Behind him was a grim-faced M.D. who pointed at Fowler and me and said, "Come here."

Silently we trooped after him, with Marv trailing behind. The doctor—whose nametag read HOWARD GRIEF, M.D.—pulled a clipboard from its niche and turned to face me.

"You're Mr. Betz's nephew, aren't you?"

I nodded. "Uh . . . does Arnold have some kind of problem?"

"Not really," said Dr. Grief, eyeing his clipboard. "It's more like *your* problem."

I tried to figure a workable escape route. "What do you mean?"

He smiled. "Arnold says you worry too much about him. Believe me, Dave, I've never *seen* a man in better health. Low blood pressure, rock-steady pulse—and the best reflexes I've ever encountered!"

I goggled at this reversal, but Fowler laughed and clapped the doctor's shoulder. "Great news, doc! Well, we'll be going now—"

That's when the door smashed open.

And two big guys in identical sport coats burst in, blocking the doorway, brandishing badges. "Benson and Crenshaw, FBI," snapped the uglier of the two. "Everybody stay put."

Dr. Grief stepped indignantly forward. "What's this all about?"

"Insurance fraud," Benson snapped. "Textbook case. Someone takes a rich suicide, reanimates the corpse, and certifies it healthy. Don't laugh, doc. Some of these deaders are real convincing—fake blood pressure, pulse, reflexes, everything."

The doctor looked flabbergasted. "Someone tried that *here*?"

"That's right." Benson pulled a Polaroid from his coat. It showed a frail-looking woman in a pea-green peasant skirt. "Mary Lou Peaslake, founder and president of Peaslake Cosmetics. Two weeks ago she drank turpentine, but her darling daughter wants a shot at the insurance. Seen her around?"

"Why, yes," said Grief. "She's my next patient—"

The agents about-faced and sprang into Grief's waiting room. But they needn't have bothered; Mary Lou Peaslake was long gone.

And so was Arnold Betz.

**I**t was some time before we found the note in Arnold's safe deposit box.

We were pretty discouraged by then; two weeks of fiscal scouring had turned up not a nickel of my uncle's savings. Frequently we were told that a man of Arnold's description had just made a huge withdrawal, often in the company of a frail-looking woman.

So it was without much hope that we opened that last deposit box. And the note inside, scrawled in Arnold's handwriting, did little to buoy our spirits. It posed a rhetorical question: *Who'd have thought death could be such fun?*

I don't begrudge Arnold his December-December romance. I'm glad he found a reason to go on not living. But I wish he could have left a few crumbs behind for dear old Dave.

That's why I'm leaving you this manuscript, Phil. I figure Uncle Arnold will be much more generous with one of his own kind.

When you find my body, you'll know what to do.





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FICTION

# —Dead— —Standstill—

by Rex Miller

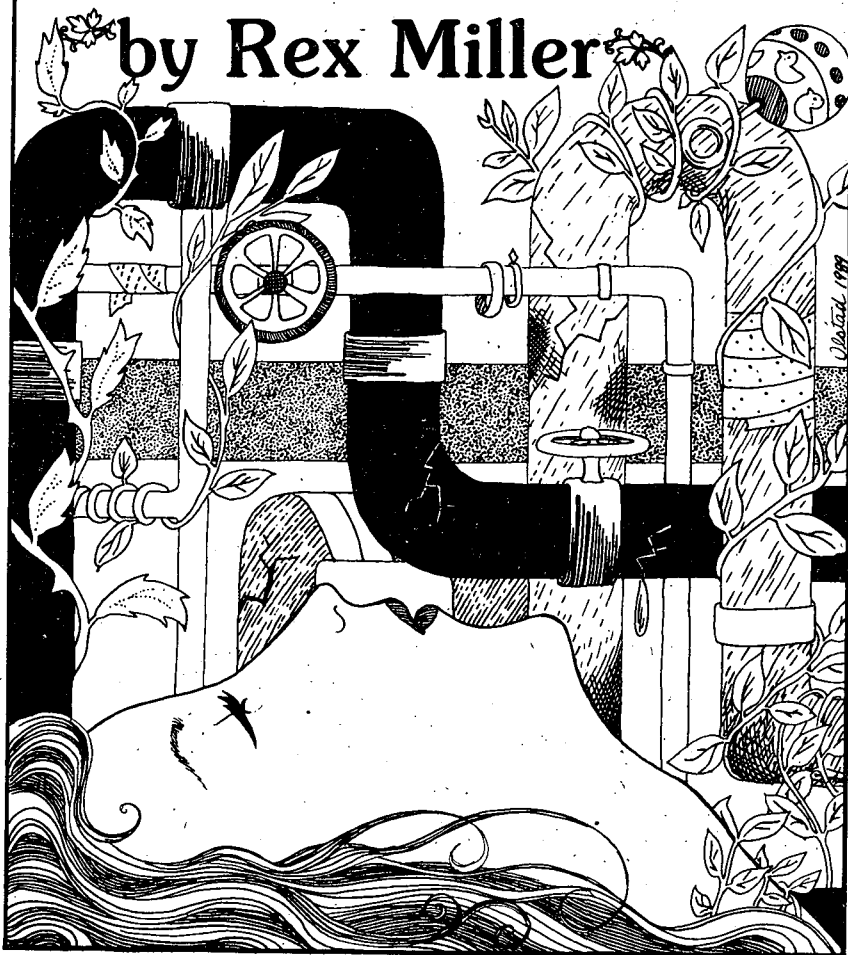


Illustration by Patricia Olstad

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**O**n a sweater - chilly robin's - egg - blue - sky Tuesday morning in the second week of May, Nancy Hamilton was flat on her back, freezing where her sweater and shirt had worked up and exposed her skin to the cold plastic sheet, trying to make the family spa stop making those tortured, dying noises.

"I mean it," she whispered. "I'm going to *murder* you," she threatened the gargling thing. The innards of the fiberglass and wood four-person hot tub gurgled and burbled and moaned in response, sounding as if it was about to give up the ghost on its own.

Gentle efforts to reason with it had failed. Imprecations hadn't worked. She'd worked her way up to murderous threats.

What was it Mike used to say about how things wear down? Something about how you can't repeal the second law of thermodynamics. Alas, the great handyman was no more. Mike was history. Things had worn down. Their marriage, for instance.

Exasperated, she slammed the access door to the monster shut, and of course the hot tub motor immediately quit making the hideous noise and began purring contentedly. The old angry door slam—the oldest

trick in the service manual.

"Un-be-liev-able." She laughed, pulling her shirt down and tucking it in, rearranging her sweater, and walking through the master bedroom and into the bathroom to wash the gook off her hands, proud of having singlehandedly changed the spa filter.

When she turned on the faucet, the hot water heater made a moaning, gurgling noise.

If Mike was here, *he'd* be tending to all this stuff. Changing the filter, checking the frammis—whatever it was. This was man's work. She identified the sexist thought and rejected it.

In the kitchen there was a list of everything that was falling apart, going wrong, running down, breaking. She would go in and write *bathroom faucet* at the bottom of the list, and when she got hold of Mr. Emmert, their plumber, he could take care of everything at one time.

She missed having a man in the house. She missed the kids. And more than she cared to admit to herself at the moment, she missed Mike.

She couldn't face an attack of the guilts right now, and she decided some fresh air would do her a lot of good, so she got an old windbreaker and a scarf out of the closet and went out into the yard.

It was chilly, but the ten foot high cedar fence that closed off a large section of their yard, now Nancy's flower garden, managed to block off most of the cold wind.

As if it had tuned in on her mood, a bright yellow male goldfinch swooped down for a seed pit stop, landing virtually at arm's length from her. Amazingly unafraid as it availed itself of the feeder. She stood still for a minute or so enjoying the beautiful bird; then she walked over to one of the benches and sat down to relax and enjoy her yard.

It was a never-ending show at this time of the year. She sat, transfixed, as a dumb sparrow ran a hummingbird off the swinging feeder. Glossy grackles soared overhead registering their opinion. A male cardinal carefully cracked a seed and carried it away to his nesting mate. She always put seed out for her birds, and was inevitably rewarded by a serenade of song and a chorus of cheerful chirps.

She'd fed birds when they lived in the rental houses, too, but it hadn't been the same. These were *her* birds. *Her* yard. Once it had been their yard. But it hadn't worked out.

At thirty-eight, Nancy was petite, five feet two and a half inches tall, pretty, smart. A

year ago she would have described herself as a housewife. The year before that a housewife and mother. But all that had changed.

In the two year interim, the accident had taken Davey, Nora had run away, and Mike had fallen in love.

It was a love affair with someone awesome in her wiles; a woman with whom Nancy Hamilton could not compete. Mike had fallen for the white lady. Cocaine. Or maybe cocaine and money in equal parts—what difference did it make now? He was gone from her.

It had all started when Dixie, Mike's aunt, had passed away and left Mike the money. Ninety-seven thousand and change. Such a godsend, they'd thought. And who would ever have imagined Dixie would have saved up all that money—all those hundreds and fifties hoarded away in a closet shoe-box?

Until then the dream of building their own home had been out of reach. But when you added the ninety-seven thou to their certificates of deposit, it was just enough to do it. The first thing they did was send away for some blueprints. And even before the bank had transferred the funds, Mike was talking with a local contractor about the nineteen hundred

square foot dream house they'd thought about for so many years.

Mike could never settle for anything ordinary. He had to be a big shot. They couldn't build on a lot in town. No. He was tired of living in those "boring tract houses in the city," so they bought a twenty acre country site beyond the city limits. That was just the beginning of their problems with the house: no city water.

The hard water had been a major problem at first. There was such an unusually high mineral content you couldn't drink the water, you couldn't wash your clothing in it—you could barely stand to bathe in it. But then there was the damn pool.

Mike had to have a pool. He insisted on it. It was all he really wanted, he said. You can have your courtyard and your garden, your sewing room, your spa, your plants, your built-ins, your kitchen. "But I get my pool." An outdoor, Olympic-size, below-ground, deluxe pool complete with all the gadgets and goodies the pool people said you couldn't live without.

Now Mike's pool was no more. It was a few feet away, long since filled with earth, covered in thick PVC, bordered in tubing and concrete, then topped with a layer of pea gravel.

She was just getting so she

could look at the ring of gravel without feeling a stab of pain in her chest. Soon, she had been told, the heartache for Davey, their beauty of a six-year-old son, would fade and she'd find she wasn't missing him so awfully. "In time, whole days will pass and you won't think about the day your child drowned. A day, maybe even two, will go by without your blaming yourself for his death," someone had told her.

She'd just gone to answer the stupid telephone, she thought, glancing at the cordless hunk of hard plastic she carried with her everywhere now, her little Linus blanket. When Nancy had come back—not forty-five seconds later—their beautiful child was face down in the pool. The horror and numbing shock of it was still such that she had to close her eyes and breathe deeply to rid herself of the images.

Losing Davey had been the beginning of the marriage's disintegration.

Mike's social proclivity, as she called it, for drugs went into high gear. She supposed his dealing dated back to about that same time, and she knew he was moving a lot of narcotics so that he could keep up with his new country club buddies.

He quit his good job at Missouri Chemical, and he and his

rich friends would suddenly disappear for long weekends "to Atlantic City on business," or "just down to the Mardi Gras to see this guy." And she didn't let herself think about all the women.

They fell like dominoes. Nora was next. Her beautiful, headstrong teenager. Small like Mama. Five feet tall and ninety-five pounds soaking wet, but with the hair and face and curves to make men of all ages stop dead in their tracks.

Nora had a good brain, she was sweet-tempered, athletic, interested in everything—her whole life was in front of her. But when they lost Davey, and then her dad left, too—that blew it. Within a few months she'd dropped out of school—an honor student in her senior year—and was dating this horrible sleazebag who had a small town garage and Hollywood dreams.

Nancy and Nora had never been the best at communication to begin with, and Nora blamed her for the breakup of the marriage. It was now Nancy's fault that her father, as well as her little brother, was gone. Pleas to stay in school fell on deaf ears. Gentle suggestions about Tony, her longhaired, sleazy beau, met blind eyes. A few months later Nora was gone. Nancy got a postcard, heart-

breakingly without a salutation, that said, "I wanted to tell you don't worry about me. I'm fine. Tony and I are living in Colorado. We have a place in the mountains. Nora."

Not even "Love, Nora." No return address, naturally. Nancy forced the family woes from her mind and tried to concentrate on the flowers.

The ringed stone courtyard was visually pleasing, and it was bordered in landscape timbers that contained nearly three hundred feet of flowers and blooming shrubs—white and purple delphiniums, pale lavender hosta, yellow and white coreopsis, yellow shasta daisies, red and pink dahlias, Chinese holly, lavender and blue-spined veronica, purple hyacinth, white candytuft, blue geraniums and playcoden, royal robe violets—and everything was blooming now. If only it didn't turn too cold. She shivered a little, thinking about predictions for a May frost.

But the sound of the wind through the trees was an orchestral background to the birdsong. Maybe she could just sit out here smelling the honeysuckle and listening to the birds and everything bad would go away.

The interior court was a riot of pink and white weigela, Persian lilacs that were so over-



poweringly fragrant they were all you could think about when you smelled them, hot pink crepe myrtle, tulips in every color of the rainbow, maroon columbines, lavender wisteria clustered among the Siberian squill, cinnamon and ostrich ferns, Spanish needle yuccas that survived *anything*.

Even the weeds were gorgeous. She loved the yellow sheepshire that grew around the reddish-orange climbing honeysuckle. Not as fragrant as its wilder, seductively-scented cousin, but the feathered friends loved it and the blooming cardinal shrubs and lilacs gave you all the aroma you could handle and then some.

Someday, she thought, I'll come out here and look at all the pretty flowers, and the ring of gravel will not look like Davey's grave.

“**H**i, Mr. Clendennon, thank you for returning my call,” she said into the phone.

“Well, I'm sorry it took so long, but I've been wiring a house for Elmer Carr over at Willow Point. So, you know, I been gettin' home late.” It had taken nearly three weeks to get the electrician on the telephone.

“Oh, no problem,” she said,

lying. “I wonder if I could get you to fix my doorbell and my telephone?”

“Whatsa matter with 'em, Mrs. Hamilton?”

“The doorbell rings all the time and there's nobody there. It just goes off—day and night, you know? I thought it was kids playing pranks at first. And then the phone will ring and you pick it up and it's dead.”

“Well, the phone and the doorbell don't have anything to do with each other, so—” He let it trail off.

“Couldn't the wires be crossed somehow?” she asked without thinking. Jim Clendennon gave her a five minute answer, but finally she got a commitment out of him to come over and look at the doorbell. He said he was “not empowered” to work on phones. Gave her another five minutes on AT&T and Ma Bell and Western Electric and General Electric and various other companies. Apparently getting the telephone to work right was now an affair of state.

She'd had Richie Lanning look at it. He had taken it apart after extracting her promise that she wouldn't “tell,” and he'd even gone outside and shown her how you could tap her phone from the box on the side of the house, which was of very little interest to Nancy at the moment, thank you very

kindly, but he was a friend of the family and she'd been polite.

The phone still rang at all hours with nobody on the other end, and the doorbell routinely went off at least a couple of times during every twenty-four-hour period, particularly unnerving in the middle of the night, as it was one of those that played a little chimy tune.

The consensus was that the culprit was either (a) a CB base station (CB base stations now got all the flak formerly reserved for ham radio operators in general—the public now knew the phrase “CB base station!”), (b) a garage door opener “on the same harmonic frequency” (as *what?*), (c) power tools down the road at a neighbor's house (in the middle of the night?) or none of the above.

Having obtained a guarantee from Mr. Clendennon, acknowledged master electrician of the entire tri-state area, and also the highest priced, she picked up the dreaded instrument and phoned her girlfriend Sondra Reynolds.

“It's me.”

“You going?”

“I don't think so.”

“Oh,” Sondra whined, “you chicken.”

“I know.” She copped a plea of temporary fat thighs and told her she'd take her up on the in-

itation next time. A float trip. She'd surveyed herself in the cutout job in her bedroom mirror. The thighs were still okay. She just couldn't leave the house right now with all that was going on.

There was another call she was going to have to make soon, but she couldn't face that one today. With Nancy no longer putting in a four-day week at school, and the bi-monthly stipend from Mike now coming infrequently, the last of the checking account money was dwindling to nothing. Sondra told her she should get a lawyer and “sock it to him.” But lawyers were anathema to Nancy after the endless problems they'd had with the house.

In fact, one of the reasons the float trip was out was that when she and Mike and Nora had gone away for two days, just a weekend at the lake, they'd returned to find their patio awash in water. It seemed the foundation had been built too low, and heavy weekend rains had seeped into the paneled, closed-in patio, the standing, blowing rain water soaking the carpeting and the baseboards.

The irony was that when they'd come into the money Mike insisted she quit her teaching job, arguing that she needed to “concentrate on the

house." That she'd done. Since Davey's tragic drowning, it seemed that it had become her entire life. But she had to wrench her mind back to the work at hand. There was nothing to be gained stewing about her errant teenager in the Colorado mountains, or her doper of a husband.

That night Nancy Hamilton had a horrible dream of Davey's drowning, a nightmare in which she kept hearing a child screaming and choking, and when she sat up wide-eyed and fully awake at two ten A.M., the noise hadn't gone away. She heard a kind of "loud, gargling horror in the pipes," or so she described it to Red Emmert, after having literally shouted at Mrs. Emmert to put him on the phone or she'd be over to camp on their doorstep.

Mr. Emmert was there at seven, visibly irritated, but at least he'd come. Perhaps, to be fair, he was so snowed under he only worked on emergencies. Well, this was one of those. She told him about the many problems with the plumbing, the spa, the bathroom faucet, on and on. And of course nothing acted up while the plumber was there. He replaced a couple of washers and was gone inside fifteen minutes, leaving Nancy to consider the fact that she'd dreamed the whole thing.

Three days later she was taking a shower and suddenly all the cold water was off and the hot water was boiling out of the plumbing, scalding her, she was screaming, fighting to get out from under the shower. Again, Emmert came out, and again he could find nothing wrong.

"Miz Hamilton," he said, kindly, "I know you been through a lot and that with the little boy, you know, and I, uh, I think maybe, uh—" and she finished the sentence for him.

"I know what you're thinking. I guess maybe you're right." And she didn't protest. Let it go at that. Maybe the trouble was of her own making.

But the next morning she looked out the living room window and was chilled with fear at what she saw. Every other flower and small plant in the garden was either dead or dying. Her precious flowers! Even the large shrubs were suddenly beginning to look brown. She worked in the garden all day, watering, spading, mulching, but she couldn't kid herself about it. Something was wrong. She double-checked with the weather station, but there was no way the nights had been cool enough to cause this. Something had come up out of the ground and killed everything in the courtyard.

The following night she

dreamt again, although she could not recall the specifics of the dream. Only that when she awoke shortly after one A.M. she heard not so much a gargling horror as a loud and unnerving bubbling noise in the plumbing.

This time she was taking no chances. She got the small tape recorder from the study, made sure it had two fresh batteries in it, and taped ten minutes of the noise coming out of the pipes.

"Hello," Mrs. Emmert said in her irascible snarl.

"Mrs. Emmert, this is Nancy Hamilton again."

"You gotta stop calling in the middle of the night like this. My husband gotta get his rest."

Nancy knew one of the Emmert kids from school. The girl was just like her mother: lazy, fat, petulant, mean-spirited, and hypochondriacal.

"Mrs. Emmert, just listen." She hit *Play* on the recorder, and a loud but undecipherable garble spit into the phone.

But when Red Emmert showed up she didn't need the recording—the noise was still bubbling away. It had grown louder, if anything.

"Well, I can tell you what *this* is," he said. "But this isn't the way you described the noise before."

"No," she explained, "I know.

But it wasn't making this noise before. What the heck is it?"

"I'll tell you exactly what it is. It's a high water table. We got the same thing in some of the houses in town." He explained to her what a high water table was and how it could cause the bubbling phenomenon.

"But what can we do to stop it?"

"You cain't do nothing to stop it. Not till that water level drops back down."

"But won't this tear up the pipes and everything?"

"Nah. It won't hurt nothin'. Just don't run no more water than you have to."

That night the faucets began dripping. The pipes had stopped bubbling temporarily, but all the faucets in the house were leaking water—the newly washered hardware! Drip... drip... drip... drip... drip... DRIP... DRIP!

It was an irregular and maddening noise that woke her about four with a really loud and metallic ping... ping... PING; an increasingly loud noise coming from the direction of the kitchen. Almost as if someone was *making* the noise, like hammering on the kitchen pipes with a ball-peen hammer... ping... PING! BANG! Wait a minute. The noises were

too loud for any dripping water. Suddenly Nancy was aware that these were man-made and she was frantic, fumbling first for the revolver she kept under the bed and then dialing the sheriff's office on the bedroom phone. A bored dispatcher telling her "we'll send somebody," trying to ask her a lot of questions and the pounding getting louder and louder.

She slammed the phone down on the idiot and, holding the weapon shakily in front of her, began to make her way down the darkened hallway between the master bedroom and the living room adjoining the kitchen.

Should she turn the lights on and scare away the intruder?

Just as she was going around the corner, the noise stopped and Nancy froze, and it was at that moment of insight she remembered that sometime after the problems with Mike had begun, she'd become afraid of the loaded firearm under their bed, and she'd removed the bullets. She could see the bullet box very clearly in her mind, a green and yellow box of Remington .38 Special "Plus P's." Very deadly, silver bullets just like the guy with the mask used. The one small problem—they didn't happen to be in the gun she was holding.

She was still standing there like a statue in marble, *Woman*

*in Bathrobe Holding Empty Gun*, when the sheriff's vehicle crunched up in the driveway and she heard his loud banging on the front door. Nancy knew even as she answered the door, turning on the lights and breathing again, that there would be no one outside.

A week later and she was soaking in the tub and "rusty red-brown stuff began coming out of the plumbing." She shut off the faucets but not before something that smelled like excrement had seeped into the bath with her. She leaped out of the tub, then tried to wash it out and wash herself off with the shower, but more of the same. The smell was beyond anything imaginable.

She ran outside into the courtyard, nude, opened a garden hose, and miraculously it did not spew filth and she was able to rinse herself off.

By mid-afternoon she'd dried her body, dried her tears, and had two full-scale knock-down-drag-out screaming matches with Red Emmert's wife. So it was a combative woman who snatched the phone from the receiver on its first ring and, instead of her usual warm "hello," uttered a tight "Yes?"

She was floored to hear the once-familiar baritone say, "Nancy, it's me."

"Mike?"

"Sorry to bother you, but I need some tax stuff. You got a couple seconds?" He seemed curt and even colder than usual.

"All right," she replied, keeping her voice in an equally flat tone.

"I need to come over and borrow our last joint return. Do you still have all our returns in the metal file box?"

"Yeah. As far as I know. Mike, listen, we've got real problems. I need to see you about the house." With the word "house" the floodgates burst, and suddenly she was telling him about all the problems. About what a nightmare the house had become. About money worries. Letting it all flow into the telephone.

"I don't know what to do. The place is costing a fortune. I can't afford to keep paying plumbers. Mr. Clendennon is going to send me a big bill. The medical insurance is due. I've got Red Emmert's wife ready to kill me. I can't get him out here. I—"

"Emmert is about a hundred years old, number one. Call that guy Ducas—you know who I mean?"

"No."

"He does industrial work, mostly. I'll get hold of him and have him come out. You gonna be home in the morning?"

"Sure."

"Okay," he said. She ex-

tracted a promise from him to come out in the morning and try to help with the house. She would give him the tax records then. They could discuss her money problems.

True to his word, Mike was there bright and early, and the new plumber showed up soon after. The men agreed that the culprit was the septic tank.

"Red Emmert called that one right, Mrs. Hamilton," Ducas assured her. "You've got a real high water table out here. You can dig down about a foot and you hit bubbling water. That's what happened—that water is messing up the lines and that. It's got into the drain lines and I 'spect caused the crack in the septic tank, which leaked that sewage into your plumbing somehow—see?"

Mike knew of a guy who would help fix the tank and sink new drain lines. After Mr. Ducas was gone, she told him all about the noises, the false alarms, one thing after another, and he just stood there looking at her like she'd lost her mind. Listening to her run through her catalogue of household woes with undisguised irritation.

"You know, this is really great." He started to read her off but managed to bite his tongue and just shook his head. He seemed like a stranger with



a familiar face. Once so tanned and handsome, he was pallid and unshaven. Her once fastidious husband appeared disheveled, his movements nervous and exaggerated. Nancy wondered if she had changed as much in his eyes.

"It's not my fault the house is coming down around my ears," she said in a soft and what she hoped was an unchallenging voice. "I can't afford to keep it up. And even when I go back to work, which I'm going to have to do immediately, Mike, I'm not going to be earning the kind of money this place is going to take. We've got to sell the house." He looked at her like she was crazy.

"This is a rotten time to sell." He talked about soft housing starts and a lot of things she didn't understand. But he said, "I guess I can ask around. See how difficult it would be to get a buyer for the place." Soon he was gone and Nancy was once again alone with the house.

The following two days were uneventful. Then, late at night, Nancy caught herself listening for a telltale squeak of floor in carpeted, reinforced flooring that she *knew* could yield no sound. Listening for the boiling, bubbling, mean essence of this ground that would spew up

in the pipes as she lay in bed, unprotected and alone. She knew what she was doing to herself.

She knew so much about this house—she could stare at a pattern of flowers in her hand-picked, hard-won wallpaper and see the sheetrocker's product, or the insulation that she and her man had helped to stuff carefully between the framework of the two-bys. See the house naked under its coat of many colors. She knew this baby, bad and good. And she knew there was a presence here besides herself.

Finally, when she fell asleep, deeply, she dreamed the worst nightmare yet. And in the dream she saw light catch on gold and saw it to be the hand of a man. A golden band on the hand of a man, she dreamed, musically.

Dreamed of a woman in a mirror. Soft, shoulder-length hair. Large and expressive eyes in a pretty, oval face. Good cheekbones. Nice nose. Small and well made. Wiry toughness under velvety smooth skin. Sturdiness of upper leg, slimmness of ankle.

"Sometimes I forget how beautiful you are," a man whispers from so many months ago. Baby-talk nicknames. Giggled pillow secrets. A remembered foreplay to lovemaking. An aftermath of angry recrimina-

tions, talk of money and coke. "Have the goodness to lower your voice." They are not alone in the house.

She dreams of the little child. A boy so small, his tiny body wet and slickly smooth. Nancy will never forget the touch of his icy skin. She fights not to remember this so clearly in the vivid and painful dream, and as it segues to another incident, she still shivers from the screaming injustice of it, shakes from the extraordinary depth of abject grief.

She dreams she is awake and eyes like saucers stare into the luminous face of the bedroom clock. A noise.

This dream that knows no logic, no chronology, no mercy, has her wide awake and listening to the drip-drippppp—*ping*—PING! She is moving silently through the house, her footsteps deadened by seven thousand dollars' worth of wall-to-wall turquoise shag. Hammering from the kitchen.

Frozen, fighting not to breathe, she waits for the frighteningly-irregular pounding to resume. BBBAAMMMMMM! A grenade-loud concussive explosion pounds against her senses and she springs for the nearest weapon.

Hand clutching gun. Where are the bullets? CALL THEM

CARTRIDGES THE BULLETS ARE THE PART ON THE END, a man's voice growls from the past. Her shoulders shake as she sobs in her sleep, passing the leaded glass tiger who is so beautiful by day, but whose image in the vista of the nighttime garden is menacing beyond expression. A man's hulking shadow fills the hallway and she says, in a voice like a hard, clenched fist, *I have a gun. . . .*

"Mike. I can't take it any more," she tells him. On the phone at the crack of dawn. She will not listen to soft housing starts, plumbing repairs, high water tables. "We've got to sell it," she screams into the phone, forcing back the tears that will soon come. "I can't take another night of sleeping pills, plugs in my ears, the house crying out to me, phones and doorbells ringing. Things leaking and dripping and breaking. I CAN'T TAKE IT ANY MORE!"

There are weeks Nancy never let herself think about again. Mike found a guy who would take the house off their hands—someone he'd met out at the club—she knew him vaguely and had never liked him. But it was the offer that was so ridiculous—fifty thousand dollars. It was a quarter of a million dollar house, conservatively, not counting the acreage.

Bad weeks. Savage time of illness and depression. They ended up closing the deal. When the smoke had cleared, she was left with less than eighteen thousand dollars, but at least she was out of the house.

Nancy and her friend Sondra had gone out to pick up her things at the house. She was in the courtyard looking at the place where Davey had drowned. The plastic around the gravel had worked itself up out of the ground and was circling the yard like ugly parts of big black serpents. Every shrub and tree had died—even the weeping mulberries in her once-romantic garden now stood barren and dry. The dead bushes resembled tumbleweeds on stalks. Weeping mulberry. Weeping peach. Weeping Nancy.

“Any problems?” Mike said to the guy from the bank.

“Nope. No problems.” He hefted the attaché case in his right hand. Both of them laughed excitedly. “Does this

look like problems?” He opened it.

“Jeezus!” There were stacks of beautiful portraits of Mr. Franklin. Federal Reserve note portraits. More than Mike had ever seen at one time. His buddy at the bank had a client, a big potato chip conglomerate, who decided they couldn’t live without the Hamiltons’ twenty acres. Mike and Nancy sold the land to a dummy corporation for fifty thousand. The corporation peddled it back through the bank for half a million. Mike and his pal split the difference. The dummy corporation dissolved. The principals vanished. The chip people had the land. Mike and the bank guy had the money tax free. The paper trail stopped dead inside the bank. You couldn’t get cleaner at the laundry.

It was also nice not to have to go play games with his ex at odd hours. Nancy had been more work than he’d thought she would be. For a while there he had thought he was going to have to start salting the well water.

FICTION

# Filial Gifts

by Herbert Resnicow



Illustration by Peggy Ranson

38  
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

**S**kinny little Dr. Homer Cudlipp was boiling mad as he faced the seven burly giants. "Are you morons trying to kill your father?" he whispered.

"Heck, no, Doc," said Claude, the oldest son, hefting a rack of beef wrapped in butcher paper. "We're just trying to make his last days happy. Can't be much fun for him just laying there eating rabbit food."

"Lower your voice," Cudlipp whispered, "he's sleeping. I put him on that diet to get his weight down for the operation."

"We don't need all this palaver," said Walter, the youngest, in his normal bull-bellow voice. "I'm holding a gallon of my special super ice cream that's going to melt if we don't get it in the freezer real soon. Let's wake up the old man and ask him what *he* wants."

"You already done woke him up," said Albert, the bearded one, walking to the bedside. He held up a bottle of thick green liquid. "Here, Pop, green Charreusse, your favorite."

"Look what I got you, Pop." Fat Francis waddled over, holding a box of cigars. "Smuggled in direct from Havana."

Little Joe stepped forward with a basket half as high as his six feet eight inches. "It's all here, Pop. Finest fruit basket in Texas. Put it together myself. Dig in."

"Stop this at once, you stupid apes," yelled Doc Cudlipp. "Get out of here and leave him alone."

"It's all right, Homer," old Daniel Boone Vincent said weakly. "Let me see what else my loving family brought me."

Giving the doctor a triumphant look, Skinny Ralph pushed his two hundred pounds to his father's bedside. "Got a van full of flowers outside. Make the room look real nice, and smell good, too. Couple o' the Mescans'll bring 'em right in."

"And you, Samuel," the old man asked. "What did you bring your poor sick father?"

"Candles, Pop. For your shrine," said Bald Sam, pointing to the statuette of St. Jude in the corner. "Fat ones, a foot long. And our prayers go right with them, don't they, fellas?"

All seven sons nodded solemnly. Doc Cudlipp could no longer contain himself. "I think it was real nice of you boys to bring your father all these things. I'm sure, Claude, that fat marbled steaks are just what a man with clogged arteries needs most. And you, Walter, I'll bet that's French ice cream you got there, full of egg yolks and heavy cream. Best-tasting poison there is for him."

"You think I'd poison my own father?" Walter roared. "I'll show you." He pulled a folding knife out of his back pocket and ripped the cover off the plastic

container. With the point of the knife, he tried to dig out a piece of the hard-frozen ice cream. "I made this in the plant myself; double everything, with real vanilla beans." He finally gouged out a big piece and swallowed it. "Great stuff. Now would I swallow poison myself?"

"That wasn't what I meant, you dumdummy," said the doctor, "and you know it." He turned to the bearded man. "Albert, isn't the green Chartreuse a mite stronger than the yellow?"

Albert nodded proudly. "Hundred and ten proof. Last bottle I got in inventory."

"And you, Little Joe." Doc turned to the tallest son. "I'll bet you've got more than fresh fruit in that basket."

"Sure have," Joe smiled. "Candied fruit in the middle, finest Belgian chocolate cream below, and genuine imported brandy-filled chocolates on the bottom."

"You boys really know what a diabetic needs most, don't you?" Doc smiled sarcastically. He looked at the other three. "I'll bet Francis's cigars are the big black ones. And your candles, Sam; got lots of them?"

"Close on two hundred," Sam said proudly. "All I could find that size. When it comes to St. Jude, you got to go all out."

"Enough to burn all the oxygen out of the Astrodome, eh,

Sam?" Doc snarled. "Do your father's emphysema a lot of good." Meanwhile, Francis was lighting up one of his big black cigars. Cudlipp strode silently on the thick carpet, tore the cigar from Francis's fat lips, and walked quickly to the patio doors. He parted the heavy drapes and flung the cigar as far away as he could.

Francis, finally realizing what had happened, growled, "You try that again, Doc, and old as you are, I'll rip your arms off."

Cudlipp faced him coldly. "Any of you baboons even touch me," he said, "and you'll be pulling scalpels out of your fat bellies for a week." He turned to Skinny Ralph. "Now here's a dutiful son, brought flowers for his daddy. A whole van full. Enough to use up whatever oxygen the candles might've missed. I'll bet half of them are roses."

Ralph nodded proudly. "Long-stemmed American Beauties. I sell 'em for four bucks apiece."

"But we all know that money's no object, Ralph, as long as your father's allergic to roses." Doc glared at them all. "How come you guys missed a way to get at his dandruff?"

"Aw, Homer," said Claude, the oldest, "don't get all bothered. Sure we knew all this was bad for Pop; but we figured if you're gonna go, you might as well be having a good time



when you go. That's how I'd want it. That's all it was: just trying to give Pop a good time."

"So you didn't know about your father going to cut you all out of his will tomorrow?" Cudlipp asked.

The others tried to look innocent; Claude looked sheepish. "Yeah, well, I did hear something like that, but I didn't put any stock in it. Pop was always kidding. Who else would he leave it to?" Claude asked. "He can't leave it to Eileen, and he don't believe in charity. We wouldn't even mind a bit," he looked sideways at his father in the bed and spoke as if striking a bargain, "if he decides to give a share to Eileen. One seventh each, or one eighth, who cares? There's plenty to go around."

Disgusted, Cudlipp spoke sharply. "Get out, all of you, and take your poison with you. And if you try anything else, or even come around here before the operation, I'll have the sheriff on you."

"Wait," said Daniel Boone Vincent from the bed. "It's still my house and I give the orders around here. I want some of my presents. Don't fuss, Homer, it's for later. One banana and one flower, a daisy if you got one. Get a snifter from the cabinet there and pour one jigger of the Chartreuse in it. Leave it on my night table, the patio side; I don't want to mix things up

with my water and the nitro pills if I need them in the middle of the night. And one candle. Light it, Homer, and put it on the floor in front of St. Jude. Now get out, boys, and thanks for the thought."

As soon as the door closed behind the seven big men, Homer Cudlipp sat down next to the bed. Daniel Boone Vincent was crying silently, the first time Cudlipp had seen him cry, even in private, since the death of his wife ten years before. After a while, he spoke quietly. "What did I do wrong, Homer? I helped them, supported them, made each one a manager in one of my businesses. I was going to leave everything to them. What did I do to deserve this? They wanted to kill me; even tried to make a mockery of St. Jude." The old man turned his face away. "Where's Eileen, Homer? Why didn't she come to see me?"

"You told her never to darken your doorstep again," Cudlipp said gently.

"She married out of the faith, Homer; I had to. But if she had asked, just once . . ."

"She's as stubborn as you are, Daniel."

"I'm her father, Homer. She's the one who has to come to me." He paused for a moment. "How's her baby?"

"Just fine, Daniel. He's going to be a big one, just like his



grandpaw. Gained five ounces just this first week, would you believe it?"

"Well, that's one good thing. I was afraid he was going to be a shrimp, like his father. Does the kid look like my side at all, or is he going to have a nose like them?"

"Daniel," Doc Cudlipp chose his words carefully, "he looks like a mixture of Vincents and Bergers, and you better get used to the idea or else you're going to be a lonely old man. If any of those seven mules you sired ever gets married and has kids, which I doubt, they will not look like Vincents if their wives can help it, you can be sure of that."

"Still," the old man said wistfully, "it'd be nice to have somebody to carry on my name."

"Sure would," Doc agreed. He hesitated, then spoke. "One more thing I have to tell you. Your surgeon. I'm bringing him here tomorrow morning at eight to look you over, see if you're ready for the operation."

"I know that; you told me yesterday."

"Should've brought him then, but I've been trying to figure out how to tell you the rest of it. The surgeon is Howard Berger."

"You crazy, Homer?" Daniel turned red. "He hates me. He'll kill me the minute he gets me under the knife."

"He doesn't hate you; you hate him."

"Couldn't you get Cooley? Or DeBakey? I'll wait if they're busy."

"You can't wait. Besides, this is a new operation, one Berger developed himself. He's good, even at his age. Only chance you got, and I'm talking straight with you. If the operation works, you've got yourself maybe ten more years to watch your grandson grow up."

Daniel Boone Vincent leaned back on his pillow, his face drawn. "This's been some day. First my sons try to kill me, then my son-in-law's going to kill me and get away with it. And there's no one to carry on my name." The old man lay thinking for a while, then spoke decisively. "Homer, get me Tom Meehan here right now. Have him bring a secretary and a typewriter. You stay; I want you as a witness. I'm going to change my will."

"Can't it wait till after the operation?"

"No, Homer, call him now." The old man was insistent. "I want it finished right after supper. That bastard Berger ain't going to let me get up off that operating table alive, and you know it."

"All right, Daniel," the doctor said soothingly. "Try to get a little rest now. I'll have supper with you and be your wit-

ness. After that, I'll give you a pill so you can get some sleep tonight."

Dr. Howard Berger arrived at the Vincent house a little before eight in the morning. Dr. Cudlipp met him at the door. "I tried to call you," he said, "but you had already left. To save you the trip. Dan Vincent died last night." Cudlipp's eyes were red and his voice was strained. "I'm having coffee. Come in, I want to talk to you."

In the kitchen, Cudlipp told Berger in bitter detail about the events of the day before, ending with Vincent's desire to see his daughter again. "Tell Eileen that her father loved her, Howard, and really wanted to make up with her."

"If he had just called her," Berger said, "just once . . . Eileen and I would have been here in a flash. She loved him, but he was a stubborn, prejudiced old man. My parents didn't want me to marry a Gentile, but they got to know Eileen and love her. They came to the wedding and they're the happier for it."

"I told Dan the same thing. I think he would have come around eventually; too bad he didn't live to see his first grandson."

"All he had to do was ask. I wouldn't have minded if Eileen had brought the baby here without me." Berger shook his

head ruefully. "Why did you wait so long to tell him I'd be operating? I really should have examined him a lot earlier. Maybe I'd have found something we could have treated, prolonged his life until I could operate."

"I didn't want him to know until it was too late for him to change his mind. I'm a good diagnostician, Howard; there was no reason for him to . . . He just up and died."

"Are you sure? With all you told me about my brothers-in-law . . ."

"I haven't signed the death certificate yet," Cudlipp said, "but it sure looks like a natural death to me. No marks on the body that indicate anything else. Lividity in the proper places. Slight cyanosis, but consistent with his heart and emphysema."

"Mind if I take a look?"

"Not at all, doctor; I'd be grateful. I don't think I missed anything, but I'm a little upset right now and another opinion would be appreciated."

Berger and Cudlipp walked around the dead man's room. The lamp was lit over the statuette of St. Jude; the candle on the floor was out, half burned down. The drapes at the window and the patio door were still drawn, making the room dim and stuffy. Berger snapped on the lights. The little brown

bottle of nitroglycerin pills and the glass of water, empty now, lay on the carpet next to the night table where Vincent must have knocked them when he reached for them. The old man lay on his back with his mouth slightly open, the grayish-blue pallor of death on his face. The blankets were pulled back, exposing his naked body. "I figure he died about six hours ago, more or less," Cudlipp explained. "I'd just finished examining him when you arrived."

"Any toothmarks on his lips or cheeks? Or the pillow?" Berger asked.

"No signs of pressure on his face, throat, or chest," Cudlipp replied.

Berger walked to the other side of the bed. The snifter lay broken on the floor, dried drops of green syrup sticking to the pieces of glass. A daisy, its petals brown and withered, lay among the shards of a china vase. A banana, its skin completely brown, was on the floor between the bed and the overturned night table.

Berger looked closely at the corners of Vincent's eyes and lips, into his nostrils and his ears. "You checked all the body orifices?"

"Pretty well, but if you think there should be an autopsy, I have no objection. I doubt if the seven dwarf mentalities even know what an air embolism is,

and if they do, they're too clumsy to do it right; a club is more their speed. Besides, I gave Dan a very mild soporific. He could still be pretty strong for a few seconds and he was almost as big as Little Joe, so it would've been hard to stick a needle in him without his making enough noise to wake the maid. Unless he was drugged and held down, which would've taken two of them. Possible but unlikely; those boys don't like each other all that much."

"Couldn't someone have gotten in through the patio door?" Berger asked.

"Easily, and the front door, too, if they were real quiet and the dogs knew them. The only thing I'm interested in right now is do I sign the death certificate or do I call in the sheriff?"

"Daniel Boone Vincent was murdered, Doctor Cudlipp," Berger said quietly, "and I'm pretty sure I know who did it. Get all my brothers-in-law here; we're going to have a confrontation."

"Are you crazy? They hate you already, and they're jealous of you, too. Any one of them could break you in half. Even Claude weighs twice as much as you do."

Berger was firm. "Please send for them, doctor."

"I already did, but not for this. They'll be here any minute

now, so you'd better get going. I'll hold off signing the death certificate. Call me later and tell me why you think . . . if I agree with you, I'll call in the sheriff."

It was too late. One by one, the seven Vincent brothers filed into the bedroom. After a glance at his father lying on the bed, Claude's eyes found Berger. "What the hell are you doing here?" Claude asked. "Trying to get your hands on the money already? Can't even wait till he's buried?"

"Your father was murdered, Claude," Berger answered. "Don't you want to know how?"

"Won't do you any good if he was, Berger," Fat Francis jeered. "He died before he could change his will and I happen to know that you don't get a red cent."

"You watch those accusations, Berger," Claude said threateningly. "You got something to say, say it and out. Anyone killed my father, it's my place to take care of him, not no mangy son-in-law."

"Look around you," Berger said. "The candle on the floor is out, partly burned down. Who put it out? Why? To make the room dark? That doesn't make sense; the light over the statue is still on, much brighter than the candle."

"I see that," Claude said. "Doesn't mean a thing."

"Look at the glass of water

that fell on the floor. It didn't break."

"Course not," Claude said, impatiently. "There's a thick carpet."

"Then why did the liqueur glass on this side break?" Berger asked. "Thinner glass? Maybe. But the china vase with the flower also broke. There must've been something hard on this side of the bed when they fell off the table."

"Stands to reason," Claude said grudgingly. "So what?"

"So someone the dogs knew came in through the patio door during the night and put something hard next to the bed."

"Then where is it now?" Claude asked. "And what does that have to do with anything?"

"And who took it away?" Little Joe asked.

"That fruit basket you brought in, Joe," Berger asked. "Was all the fruit fresh?"

"Damn right it was," Little Joe said belligerently. "You saying I'd bring my father rotten fruit?"

"And whoever brought the flowers, were they fresh?"

Skinny Ralph answered. "Came from the greenhouse yesterday afternoon. Picked them out myself; the best ones."

"Then why is the daisy all brown and wilted?" Berger asked. "And the banana completely brown?" Skinny Ralph's forehead was wrinkled. Little

Joe looked thoughtful.

"Remember the jingle on the radio?" Berger asked. "About how you should never put bananas in the refrigerator? Cold does that to bananas."

"Ice wouldn't do that to a banana in one night," Little Joe said.

"That's right," added Skinny Ralph. "Nor to flowers, either. We put them in a cold room all the time; helps the flowers to keep. Besides, the carpet is dry."

"Which is just what it would be if you used dry ice," Berger said triumphantly. "Dry ice is very cold, about one hundred ten degrees below zero; cold enough to kill a flower or a banana. It turns directly to carbon dioxide gas, which is heavier than air, to put out a candle on the floor and to kill a sick old man in his bed. To chill the room and overstress his weak heart and to smother him in carbon dioxide which, in a closed room, could kill him even if he didn't have emphysema. And who would have dry ice? Who had to drive twelve miles in the hot Texas sun to deliver ice cream to the house?"

"Yeah," Claude said, "and whose ice cream was hard as a rock yesterday?" All eyes turned to Walter, the youngest one. Walter stared straight ahead, silent.

"Yes, Walter," Berger went on. "He went to the ice cream

plant around midnight, picked up a hundred pounds of dry ice and a pair of heavy gloves, and brought the blocks of dry ice here. He unwrapped the packages in his van, entered through the patio door, and put the solid carbon dioxide next to his father's bed. Dan Vincent must've woken for a moment when he couldn't breathe, knocked over the stuff on his night tables, then collapsed on his pillow. He was asphyxiated without a mark on him."

Walter spoke, sneering. "You think you're so smart, Berger? Well, you ain't. You can't prove a thing. My father died natural and there's nobody can prove different. Even if you could, there's no way to show I had a damn thing to do with it. So you better keep your mouth shut or I'll have my lawyer on you."

"You may be right about my not being able to prove you had anything to do with it," Berger said, "but an autopsy will show that the concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> in your father's blood is many times normal, and there's little doubt the coroner will find that Daniel Boone Vincent was murdered."

"That brings up another interesting point," Dr. Cudlipp took over. "Your father changed his will last night, Walter, and I was a witness. Want to hear what it says?"

"I do," Claude said heavily.

"We all do. Talk, Doc."

"After the disgusting display you boys made yesterday," Cudlipp said, "your father made two changes in his will. The first was to give you all, including Eileen, an equal share of the estate, providing he died of natural causes. That was to make sure that none of you tried anything funny and," he looked at Berger apologetically, "to make sure your knife didn't slip during the operation. Sorry about that, doctor, but he'd gotten to where he didn't trust anybody any more. Unfortunately, he didn't have time to tell you boys; might have saved his life."

"What was the other change?" Claude asked.

"If he died of suspicious causes, the entire estate went to charity." The faces of the seven brothers fell. "Unless..." The faces rose again. "Unless he had a grandson who was named after him in the year after his death. The first grandson named after him gets everything, but he has to be originally named, not a name changed by law."

Walter smirked and started toward the door. "Where you going, murderer?" Claude asked.

"Going to the hospital, adopt

a one-minute-old Mescan kid, and name him Daniel Boone. So long, brothers."

"Ain't you forgetting about Eileen's kid?" Claude asked, jerking his thumb at Berger.

"I'm not forgetting a thing," Walter said. "That kid's a week old yesterday. Changing his name won't help; that's what Doc said."

"Enjoy your ignorance, Walter," Doc said with a mean smile. "Jewish boys are named at the circumcision ceremony, eight days after birth, to which ceremony I've been invited and will attend with pleasure, this afternoon. If Dr. Berger decides to name his son Daniel Boone, the kid gets everything. If you had let your father die a natural death, you each would've been rich. Now all you've got is jobs managing your businesses, and that's for just as long as Eileen lets you. I don't know if the law can punish you, but sure as hell your brothers will take care of you themselves, for killing your father and for what you did to them."

Howard Berger picked up the phone and dialed. "Eileen," he said. "I've found a good name for the baby." And Walter watched in horror as his brothers encircled him.



FICTION

# Night of the Coon



by  
James  
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**N**o name was posted at the entrance to the half-hidden dirt road other than a faded NO TRESPASSING sign long since turned into a sieve of rust-edged bullet holes poking out a bit shyly through the overgrowth. The first short stretch across the untended field was level though puddled in spots where it hit the line of spruce and pine at the end of Ponder's Lake and suddenly slipped south. From there on it was a wash of ruts and rocks.

Squatting in the bed of the old pickup as it bucked and lunged down the dirt road, Billy Wakes fought the threat to pitch headlong at every jounce. There was plenty of room inside the cab for three, especially since, at eleven years old, he didn't take up a whole lot of room, but Ben had told him to ride in the back. Actually, that suited Billy just fine because otherwise he would have had to sit right between Ben and Spraker, and sitting too close to Spraker these days gave him the scaries.

RRRWAP! . . . the windshield plowed into another branch lazily fanned out in the summer sun and awakened yet another sleeping whip into a rolling frenzy. Billy squeezed his eyes shut and tucked his head in, but a wrenching bound of the truck flung his whole body upward as the branch raked over the top of the cab and lashed into the back of his neck.

"Slow down!" he howled. Instead, the pickup sprang forward and slammed down and Billy lost what scant equilibrium he'd managed to retain, tumbling back against the tailgate along with a loose collection of corroded tools, empty beer cans, and his big yellow bath towel neatly rolled into a bundle secured with rubber bands.

Spraker Wakes had once said that to his way of thinking the Appalach T&WV Power Company wanted the road kept all roughed up like it was. "Keeps most cars out," he said. When pressed, by a once adoring little brother, he patiently replied, "Forces them to ride up on the center hump and scrape against tree branches—or tear their bottoms out." And when pressed still further, "Ain't such a bad idea, Billy. Keeps a lot of city folks, spray paint and broken glass out of the Big Pothole."

That was back before Spraker's voicebox got all broken up, that night of cussing and shouting when the kitchen table got busted and the refrigerator got tipped over. Billy was asleep upstairs when it happened and would have slept right through it all if little Judy Halper hadn't suddenly turned on him in his dream and started cussing and shouting in a voice that just wasn't her own.

"I'm taking Billy!" she roared.

That was followed by a defiant scream and he saw his mother standing on top of the old picnic table, its weathered gray boards bending perilously under her weight. "No, you ain't, you worthless boozing swamp-slime!" she yelled. The name she hurled at poor little Judy surprised him, she'd always reserved that for "Mister Good-For-Nothing Okeechobee Jake"—her other pet name for the man who walked off the farm and out of their lives when Billy was barely two years old.

What remnant he heard after violently tossing himself awake lasted only a few seconds, the cussing was all too real and something slammed into the kitchen wall, then the whole house shook when what must have been the refrigerator went down.

Billy was about to jump out of bed and scurry downstairs, but the sudden rush of his mother's urgent footsteps on the staircase threw him into such confusion he flung the thin summer coverlet over his head and lay deathly still. The hurried footsteps stopped at the threshold of his bedroom door, a long moment ensued, and Billy could hear his mother's labored breathing.

"If you slept through that . . . then you won't hear this," she finally said softly, ". . . and it won't matter. But if you're awake . . . things is all right . . . but I don't want you down those stairs till morning."

She waited a few seconds longer, then stepped back, "I'll tell you what happened tomorrow," she said, and swiftly went back down the stairs.

A moment later, Billy inched his head out over the edge of the bed and strained without success to make out the muffled sentences that filtered up through the floor. He thought it strange the only voices he heard came from Ben and his mother. He couldn't place Spraker, the oldest brother, the man of the family his mother had always called him.

The next morning Mrs. Wakes told him a rabid coon chased one of the cats straight through the mudroom and into the kitchen and what with three people ducking and dodging and fancy stepping all over so as not to get chewed on, things got more than a bit "commotious," as she put it.

"Pity about Spraker, though," she said. "I sure didn't mean to whap him in the throat like that. Should have let your brothers take care of it instead of swinging that broom handle all over the place like I did."

Billy wanted to believe his mother, but a few things didn't fit.

Like why wasn't he allowed downstairs after it was all over? "Too messy, child," his mother said. "Those old coons die hard, and we didn't have time to put a hand on anything that would kill him clean."

And why did they have to grind the coon's body to mulch in the dead of night so quick like they did? He never got to see it.

"Don't understand that rabidness too well," his mother responded with growing impatience. "Didn't want to chance any bugs biting on it, then biting on us, or having its fumes mixing in the air around here. Now enough's been said about that coon, Billy!"

He never got to tell her how he saw their shadows thrown up by the yard light against the side of the barn. How he saw Spraker's trudging shadow in the lead, hunched over under the weight of that coon, and how he couldn't imagine there ever lived a coon so huge that Spraker had to heap it over his shoulders instead of easily carrying it in one hand.

Billy soon wished it had all never happened.

Spraker never went to see a doctor about his throat, and Billy thought it strange that neither his mother nor Ben pressed him about it. For weeks his older brother just hacked and coughed and kept to himself. Then he started finding jobs for Billy around the farm. Tough jobs—man's work.

"Guess he figures time is shortening up and you got to master a few things a little quicker than most boys your age," was about all his mother ever said to comfort him.

Summer came and school let out and the jobs got longer and harder. Sundays got to be about the only day of the week that Spraker didn't point at something and hand him a tool or abruptly motion at him to follow along to the barn. Sundays they went swimming like they always used to, but lately Billy could sense a growing fear that for some "time is shortening up" reason Spraker was on the verge of turning this last remaining summer treat sour.

It was precisely this Sunday that he got the feeling that the day he feared had indeed arrived. Before they piled in the pickup that afternoon he saw Spraker and Ben in a near-heated discussion. Ben didn't look all that pleased. Spraker seemed adamant. And the way Ben glanced at him, Billy suspected that he was the subject of the conversation.

Dispirited, Billy lay sprawled against the tailgate spitting flecks of dirt when the bucking pickup finally slowed to a stop in a bushy clearing. Sitting up with a moan, he grabbed his towel and leaned

back against the tailgate. The pickup's doors opened and he felt an uncontrollable shiver at the approaching crush of dry field grass underfoot, but he didn't bother looking up.

"He's got things on his mind, Billy boy," Ben said softly, giving him a playful nudge.

"Yeah, killing me's one of them," Billy whispered, turning the towel over and over in his lap, rubbing at smudges.

He glanced up into Ben's thin, sunburnt face. "I don't want to go down there today, Ben."

"Worse if you stay here."

"He's just not right any more!"

Ben looked away. "You'll be okay," he said, turning, no longer smiling. "Come on, jump out of there."

Ben was already cutting across the clearing alongside Spraker by the time Billy hoisted himself over the tailgate and fell into step a good twenty yards behind. Both older brothers were shirtless, exposing a latticework of old scars on their backs—Ben called it Jake's Okeechobee Brand—and both wore frayed denim cut off at the thighs, but there the similarity ended: though Spraker was the eldest, he stood a forehead shorter; where Ben was thin, sinewy, and perpetually sunburnt in summer, Spraker was thick, bull-necked, and dark.

Billy didn't try to catch up with them, but then they stopped next to a lone, familiar-looking car parked in the shade at the edge of the clearing. The white Corvette was new. A veil of road dust lay across the hood, and fresh mud fanned out in streaks from its tire wells. For the first time Billy was close enough to the out-of-state license plate to discover that what he had first thought was a green stain was actually the stamped outline of Florida.

He'd seen the car a few times in the past month, the driver hidden behind opaquely tinted windows, prowling slowly by the farm, the heavy rumbling of custom carburetors announcing its approach before it actually swung into view on the narrow country road. Once the car had even slipped boldly into the mouth of the farmhouse drive, idling powerfully, small gusts of dirt swirling out along the ground beneath the engine. Billy remembered how it then retreated slowly, mockingly, back out into the road as Spraker broke the standoff and walked unfalteringly forward, his eyes fixed on the windshield as if his vision alone was able to penetrate the masking tint.

"Didn't expect to see this," Ben said disgustedly. "Looks like he's

telling us he can follow us anywhere. Even down here."

"Whose car is it, Ben?" Billy asked cautiously. He'd asked the question before but had gotten no answer.

Ben glanced at him abruptly as if he'd forgotten he was along. Spraker clenched his jaws together and swallowed. "Go!" he gurgled painfully, swinging his finger from Billy to the path that cut through the trees.

Billy hesitated at first, then plodded off along the path until it dipped and cut sharply to the right around a gnarled pine. Suddenly he stopped. The stretch of path running to the next twist would put him out of sight of his brothers. From where he stood, he could still make them out through the patchy undergrowth, Ben gesturing and speaking freely, Spraker shrugging, nodding, occasionally rubbing his throat and emitting his usual rut of a remark.

Billy studied the path ahead of him. He pictured someone hideous waiting for him just around the next turn, crouching in a clump of ferns, or sitting bad-toothed and smelly on that flat mossy outcrop of rock that couldn't be seen yet, someone or something evil and smiling.

Clutching his towel tighter, Billy backed up until he could see his brothers just a little bit clearer, and waited. The space between them seemed warmly alive with its dancing bugs and speckled sunlight. Finally, Spraker flipped his hand at the car as if it and its owner weren't worth any more of his attention. Relieved, Billy immediately strode off, looking backwards every few steps to make sure his brothers were still following. Coming to the point where the path broke apart into a multitude of possible leads, he veered onto the one that would take him to a spot where no hard-luck, cliff-hanging pine scraggly strung out over the lip of the gorge obstructed his view of the Big Pothole.

The trees soon thinned out, sunlight bathed the opposite cliff face, and the gorge slowly opened up below as he took the last inching step that put him close to the edge. There was no one in sight. Just smooth terraces of scoured bedrock. Sunlight reflecting in sparkles off the dark tranquil water held captive in the huge stone pool. And the little streamlet of seepage from Ponder's Lake Dam weaving and spilling its way gently through the gorge.

"Just gonna stand there?"

Startled, Billy jumped back.

"Whoa!" Ben said, grabbing Billy by the arm. "Great place to be daydreaming."

"I wasn't." Billy noticed both Ben and Spraker were looking the gorge over just as he had. "I couldn't see him down there."

"Who was you looking for?" Ben asked.

"You know who," Billy replied.

Ben smiled mischievously. "Assuming that it's a he, and assuming there's only one of him, suppose he's not down there. Suppose he was hid out back at the clearing and now he's behind us."

Billy turned and peered anxiously at the dark path burrowing back into the trees.

"Then I suppose," Ben said, "we should get our butts down this cliff before someone comes up from behind and pushes us off it."

"Go!" Spraker added.

A moment later Billy stood on the floor of the gorge, turning this way and that, first toward the upper bend of gorge, beyond which and out of sight sat Ponder's Lake Dam; then toward the lower bend where a small brick powerhouse sat attached to a chain link enclosure surrounding four squat transformers shaped like monster black beetles stuck upright in concrete. There were so many layers of terraces and ledges, so many natural hiding places. He moved to the rim of the pothole and lingered there, slowly removing the rubber bands from his towel.

The water behind him suddenly erupted. Instinctively, he lurched forward, writhing in torment, unable to escape the nerve-chilling rain of cold droplets on his sunbaked skin. Spinning around, he saw Ben break to the surface, treading water and smiling euphorically.

"Cannonball!" Ben shouted. "You feel that, Billy? The water's beautiful! Ain't it?"

Billy smiled weakly, angry at himself for letting Ben catch him off guard.

His older brothers always plunged in from a large hump of stone that hung out over the dark water. Some years back, Ben had named it Nettie's Breast in honor of a blooming little classmate of his. The previous year, just before Spraker got hurt, he'd threatened to rename it Billy's Breast if a certain member of the family didn't lose his baby fat. Now there was no fear of that happening; Mother Nature had sprung him up a couple of inches since then, and Spraker had taken care of the rest.

After Spraker dived in, Billy eased himself down into his favorite spot, a waist-deep ledge that extended off to one side of Nettie's Breast like a sunken patio. As usual, Ben was soon clinging lazily

to a stump of a log he'd pushed out into the center of the pothole. What surprised Billy was the sight of Spraker climbing quickly back out of the water. Curious, Billy watched him slowly ascend an irregular staircase of little ledges behind Nettie's Breast until he found a smooth spot on a wide chamfered shelf and sat there.

At first, Spraker's quick withdrawal from the water did little to relieve the anxiety plaguing Billy. But after nothing appeared that was any more bothersome than an occasional horsefly, Billy settled into the water. It was indeed refreshingly cool. The streamlet spread out over a bottom ledge and gently poured like a thin liquid veil into the pothole. Water spiders flitted about randomly over the surface. Tadpoles clustered here and there wherever they found knuckle-deep shallows.

He liked swimming underwater the best and wasted no time in slipping beneath the surface and finding the potato-sized white grainy rock he kept hidden in a cleft at the base of the pothole rim. Breaking to the surface, he sputtered and wiped his eyes, then tossed the rock a few feet in front of him. He waited until the ruptured water calmed, then took a deep breath and slipped back down under the surface. As he moved slowly forward over the algae-slick bottom of the patio, the rock suddenly appeared a few inches from his face, standing out like an Easter egg on an olive gray plate. Holding it against his stomach he turned on his side and let some air out through his nose—having once discovered that a little less air and the weight of the rock were enough to keep him from rising to the surface.

Lying submerged until he absolutely couldn't hold his breath any longer, Billy suddenly sprang up and gulped for breath. Ben was still clinging to the log, and Spraker appeared to be napping like a drowsy lifeguard. The Big Pothole was as peaceful as ever.

Billy eased back down until the water covered his shoulders. Squinting contentedly, he urinated through his bathing suit, enjoying the warm sensation spreading around his thighs, the weird involuntary shiver of the pee chill when it came. Once spent, he tossed the rock far out in a different direction and went wading toward where it hit the water.

When he finally tired of the rock, he wedged it back in its hiding place and started scooping up tadpoles in his open hands, watching them flop around excitedly, tickling his palms as the water drained out between his fingers.

"Hey, Billy!" Ben called. He had moved the log to just a few feet



off the end of Billy's patio. "Why don't you swim out to me and this log here?"

It wasn't the first time Ben had tried to coax him into the deeper water. But whenever Billy did approach, gingerly curling his toes over the end of the submerged ledge, the water beyond looked dark and bottomless with its depths beneath depths waiting to swallow and hold him. "Maybe next time," he always begged off.

This time Billy didn't even want to consider it. "Nope," he said quickly.

"Can't be a little chickie-chickie forever."

Billy turned on Ben. "I ain't a little . . ." But never got to finish venting his rage as a movement at the upper end of the gorge caught his eye. A tall shirtless man in sunglasses and a black vest was idly picking his way down the bedrock ledges toward the Big Pothole. Between the flaps of his vest, exposed cuts of deeply tanned abdominal muscle sprang tight with every step.

Billy watched as he dropped to the next lower ledge. Something about the man looked mad—crazy mad. Jersey "Bing" Peltz had once looked like that, the same Jersey "Bing" who used to stick pins through his lips. It could have been the white hair, the way it was close-cropped at the sides and pruned like a pointy hedge on the top. Rumor had it that Jersey "Bing" had cut his grandmother's hair something like that after he'd nailed her spread-eagled to a shed door.

Turning around, Billy looked up at Spraker. He'd already spotted the solitary figure, yet he remained still slumped on the shelf, his reaction little more than a leisurely gaze.

The man dropped down another ledge. Undaunted by the next ledge even though it was higher than he was tall, he dropped without hesitation and landed with catlike agility. Taking two more ledges with the same impressive ease, he descended to the far rim of the Big Pothole and started walking around it at a confident, relaxed pace, his head tilted up, locking the stare hidden behind his sunglasses not on Ben or himself, but on Spraker.

Billy fought the desperate urge to slip back down under the surface of the water. To cover himself with it. To pretend he was unaware. He saw Spraker shift forward in readiness and Ben subtly backing his log closer to Nettie's Breast. Billy could see Ben was getting ready to abandon it and climb out of the water. His own thoughts jumped to the white grainy rock . . . a weapon! . . . could he duck beneath the surface and grab it in time?

The man stopped and looked down at a crevice where the streamlet formed up again and spilled out, resuming the final descent in its meandering journey. One short step would be all it would take for him to cross it, a quick stride after that and he would be amongst them. A pencil-thin smirk appeared on his face. Slowly, he looked back up at Spraker, then as suddenly as he had appeared at the upper end of the gorge he turned and quickly dropped out of sight over the descending ledges that led to the powerhouse below.

Ben pushed his log away from Nettie's Breast and looked up at Spraker. Rubbing his throat, Spraker continued looking down the gorge. Billy waited. Finally Spraker looked down at Ben, shrugged and flipped an open hand in the air. Then they both smiled.

It was over.

"Ben?" Billy pleaded, his voice a whining whisper.

"Forget it, Billy!" Ben said quickly.

Billy turned in frustration and plunged under the water. Retrieving the white grainy rock, he surfaced and climbed shakily out of the water. The sun had passed from high overhead; the shadow of the cliff face lay halfway across his big yellow bath towel. Plopping down on the towel, disgusted and drained, he placed the rock within easy reach and hung his head between his knees. As far as he was concerned, swimming was over, it was time to go home.

"Billy!" Ben called to him from out of sight below Nettie's Breast. "Billy!" he called again.

"What?"

"Come here where I can see you."

"What for?"

"Just come here!" Ben insisted.

Billy groaned softly, then got to his feet and stepped out warily onto Nettie's Breast. Ben was smiling deceptively.

"Ready to leave, are you?" Ben asked.

Billy nodded, feeling odd because he'd always been the last one to want to leave.

"Well, we'll go. But you got to do one thing first."

Billy had a good idea what it was. "Nope," he replied quickly.

"All you got to do is jump in here and pop to the surface and dog paddle a few feet over to your little ledge over there. Nothing to it, Billy."

"Nope," Billy repeated.

Ben's smile remained steadfast though his voice grew noticeably

stern. "I hope you noticed I said 'you got to,' not 'would you please.'"

Billy studied Ben's face. "What's that mean?" he asked apprehensively.

"Spraker and me were thinking earlier that today was the day you got out here in the deep water."

Billy shook his head and stepped back in alarm. He remembered them by the pickup. He was right, they had been talking about him.

"Chickie-chickie!"

"I ain't!" Billy shouted angrily.

Suddenly his arms were clamped in the firm grasp of two huge calloused hands and he was being hoisted effortlessly straight up in the air. He kicked and wrenched about. "Nooo!" he screamed. "No, don't!"

A second later he was held out over the water—tears bursting down his face. He twisted his head around violently. "Damn you, Spraker!" he cried out frantically. "I'll tell . . ."

"Swim!" Spraker growled and let go of Billy's arms.

Billy arched his back and stretched his neck up, screaming as he saw Spraker's expressionless face fall away from him, the ribbed skin of Nettie's Breast swiftly passing. He saw something else, just a flicker in his blurry vision, the shadow of someone stepping across his big yellow bath towel behind Spraker.

He'd twisted and squirmed in the air too much and knew instantly he was falling all wrong. He hit the water on his back and continued plunging, plowing out a deep water-sided hole that rose up and closed over him. Panic surged through him. He hadn't held his breath right—inhaled water stung the deep recesses of his nose. He closed his eyes, thrashed his feet, flailed away with his arms, and tried to scramble back out the way he'd fallen in. He was afraid to open his eyes. Everything was all wrong.

Something bit into—or bumped—his rear end. He lashed out desperately to get away from it. His elbow struck something solid. Again it was back, groping at his rear. He couldn't get away from it. Suddenly he felt a rough grip latch onto his bathing trunks and water seeping past as he was hauled upward. His head broke through the surface and he found himself propelled forward. Then his knees hit the welcome ledge of his little patio.

"Damn, Billy, you little jerk!" Ben's voice sounded like it was stuffed up with mucus.

Billy knelt coughing and gasping, clutching onto a craggy hand-

hold in the side of Nettie's Breast. Still bug-eyed from fright, he looked at Ben kneeling on the ledge beside him. Blood ran from his nose and through his fingers.

"I don't believe this—broke my nose—jerk!" Ben said, staring down at the blood.

"Spraker!" Billy gasped.

"Yeah, yeah." Ben said disgustedly. "How about that. Yeah, how about that, Spraker?" His voice rose to a bellow. "Are you satisfied, Spraker? I told you this wasn't such a good idea!"

"No, no!" Billy cried weakly. He pointed toward the top of Nettie's Breast. "Spraker!"

"Aw, forget it, Billy," Ben said. "It's over."

Billy pulled himself up on rubbery legs. "No, Ben!" he pleaded, his breath returning. "The guy—he's back!"

Ben looked up from watching his blood spread like dye in the water. "What?"

"Spraker!" Billy called out, trying to look over the top of Nettie's Breast. There was no one standing there. He started to climb out of the water, but a hand roughly pushed him aside.

"Stay there," Ben ordered. He sprang up out of the water. Bloody, wet prints appeared where he grabbed the rock. A spray of rich red spots, blown from his nose, speckled Nettie's Breast.

Then Billy saw Ben drop to his knees and groan in anguish.

"Ben!" Billy cried. He flung himself at the rocky hump and scampered up, using the same hand- and foot-holds as Ben, his fingers stained with the wet traces of his brother's blood. Straightening up, he stepped forward in disbelief. The shade from the cliff face had stretched out to cover the entire hump of Nettie's Breast. Ben had sunk to a sitting position. Spraker lay next to him, face down on the darkened rock.

Billy inched closer, looking for Spraker to move, to bend a leg, curl his fingers, grunt a remark. Stunned, he saw Ben run his hand tenderly over Spraker's head. Then he saw the splotch like a little red wad of gum stuck flat to the back of Spraker's skull. And tears were streaming down Ben's face.

"It ain't right, Billy," Ben said, his voice choking. "Aw, hell, ain't nothing been going right."

Billy bent cautiously over Spraker's body. "Spraker," he called softly.

Ben looked over at him, blood smearing his mouth and chin.

"Spraker," Billy called again.

"Billy," Ben said. "Spraker's . . . dead."

Billy stared at Ben in shock. From a distance the rumbling ignition of custom carburetors echoed faintly down into the length of the gorge. "Nooo!" Billy wailed.

The shadow of the cliff face stretched out half across the Big Pothole. Spraker lay covered with the big yellow bath towel. Tearstains streaked both Billy's and Ben's faces as they sat together off on one side of Nettie's Breast. Ben's nose had stopped bleeding.

"We figured he was one of Jake's crazy kin—I heard Ma say once that Jake was downright tame compared to some of them."

Billy hadn't asked Ben to explain anything. He just started talking because he said he needed time to think out what to do next.

"I can't tell you why he came up here. At least not yet anyway—better you don't know till you're older." Ben put his hand on Billy's shoulder. "Just believe me when I tell you Spraker didn't do nothing wrong. He always protected us."

Billy could feel new tears welling up.

"Big as that white-haired sonovabitch was, he didn't have the guts to go against Spraker straight on. Had to come up behind and hit him with this."

Billy looked over. Ben held up the potato-sized white grainy rock. Billy groaned in agony and took it from his hand. He turned it over gently, saw the tiny flecks of blood and skin on the heavy end, then let it drop, watching it roll off the face of Nettie's Breast and plunge into the hidden depths of the dark water.

"I'll remember," Billy said, choking on a sob. "I'll remember everything."

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

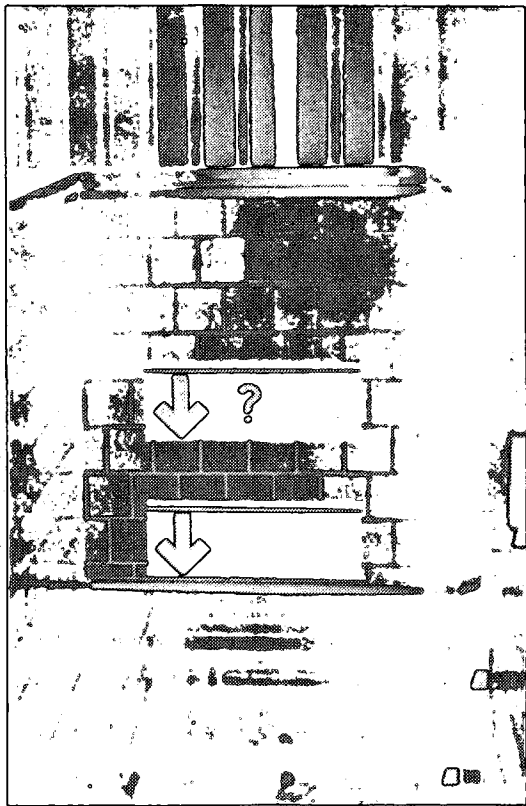


Photo by Brian N. Cox

We're staying up here. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the December Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

# Blood

by Robert Halsted



**L**ila Wilson had been dead half a year, give or take a bit. Since somewhere between the time the funeral director had handed her Tibby's ashes and the day she and the lawyer had stood there in the

hospital room, weeks later, while they unplugged the machines from Tom's mindless, battered corpse and let his poor weary heart stop its pointless beating.

Nobody could have told you



with more authority than Lila that it isn't true the dead don't hate. She had hated doctors, lawyers, undertakers, all the petty vultures that descend on the bereaved, the governor who vetoed the right-to-die bill. She hated herself for living and suffering. She wasn't ready to admit that she hated Tibby's body for being damaged beyond a mother's recognition and Tom's for breathing when it should have stopped, hated them for going together and leaving her alone, though she knew in the depths of her mind she would have to confront all this some day.

But even more than herself, she hated the drunk who had destroyed her family. Who had smirked in the courtroom when he got his license revoked for a year and six months' suspended sentence for involuntary manslaughter. At a time when love and hope were dead, it was perhaps this hatred that had kept her alive... for which scant thanks.

She listened to the dying scream of the centrifuge, something deep inside her resonating to it. Automatically, robotlike—her way of life since the accident—she lifted out the plastic bags, sterilely decanted the plasma into empty sterile bags. Add normal saline, sterile. Remix packed red cells.

Trickle it sterilely back into the donor, the only non-sterile thing in the room. Herself included.

So long as she kept her mind sterile, it didn't play tricks on her. She no longer started to tell Tom something before she realized he wasn't there, she no longer looked in Tibby's room to remember with a start that she wasn't coming back.

She still needed a shrink, but with sheer guts and gritting her teeth she had weathered the most intense of it. At the price of sterility and wrinkles. Wrinkles were beginning to show on her face, reflecting the sterile mind behind it. Her heart was sterile and wrinkled. She imagined her uterus, the womb that had borne Tibby, wrinkled like a shriveled apple. And sterile for sure; she would never let another man, another child, get inside her feelings again. One living death per lifetime was enough.

"Today you have the choice of OJ or OJ," she said to the donor. "And we're out of chocolate cookies, so you get your choice of plain." The donors thought she smiled, any stranger would have. People who had known her before the accident wouldn't have been fooled.

As soon as the fifteen minutes were up she hustled the donor out. His breath, his skin,

his clothes smelt of yesterday's stale booze, tomorrow would smell of today's.

My God, what am I doing here? she asked herself. Drunks and druggies and bikers, losers and boozers, down-and-outers. She shucked off the disposable gloves and tossed them into *Contaminated*, absentmindedly washed and dried her hands twice before she started setting up for the next donor.

The girl was an obvious druggie, everything from eye motion to skin texture shouted of it, so Lila marked a red D in a circle on the corner of the card. This one, she thought, could have been checked closer at the front desk. When they were this heavy into it, the probability of hepatitis, AIDS, and God knows what else was 'way up there, and a minute but still frightening number of these slipped past the lab.

After the druggie she took her brief, asocial lunch break and went back to the floor. The other phlebotomists and techs had no objection to her covering for them—which she preferred, without hostility, to socializing with them—so they could have more leisurely breaks.

While she was Lysoling the furniture and straightening paperwork, a donor approached the back room desk holding his card. At the sight of him she

came back to life, though she managed to conceal the fact from him.

She was sure he hadn't recognized her, but her hands trembled as she interviewed him, stuck his finger, and scrubbed his elbow. She fumbled the manometer reading twice, and took three deep breaths before she dared insert the big needle. She wanted him to think this was the most pleasant plasma bank he'd ever seen.

"Are you going to be a regular donor, Mr. Dunivan? You get a bonus, you know, if you come in regularly twice a week." Lila's smile was real now, almost seductive.

"Sure, as long as I get a sweet little thing like you to poke me."

"I'm here every day but Thursday. We're open Saturdays till three." With no home life and no social life, she didn't mind the Saturday shift.

As Lila put the patch on his arm, there flitted through her mind what she thought was a fragment of a psalm: "The Lord hath delivered mine enemy unto mine hands." She was as if possessed: some hitherto unknown aspect of her had taken over, blithe with only a trace of brittleness showing, and was charming the hell out of Sam Dunivan, murderer.

She did her best to conceal her exhilaration from the rest of the staff; she wanted no comments, no observations, no connections made.

Her high stayed with her, in a kind of afterburn or halo effect; through the rest of the afternoon. Her last donor, in shabby wrinkled clothes and with a two day beard on his face, was so smiling and cheerful she felt he must be reflecting her elation at the sudden revelation of purpose in her life.

"Your heart must be very warm," he said as she took his pulse. "Your hand's cold as ice."

"It's the air conditioning. They keep it cold in here so the blood won't curdle."

He chuckled dutifully. "What's a nice girl like you doin' in a place like this?" he asked, flashing a wide, toothy grin.

It was the kind of question she usually didn't respond to, sometimes allowed a peremptory and sarcastic answer. "Same as everybody else. Trying to survive." Then before she could stop herself she added, "What's *your* excuse, Mr. Bridges?"

He winked a roguish wink at her. "Same as everybody else. Doing research for a novel."

"You're impossible." She realized how insipid and adolescent a response that was and

resumed her frosty veil. She finished scrubbing him, jabbed the blood needle in.

"Ouch. Was that to punish me, or is this your first day on the job?"

"I have inserted thousands of needles into human flesh. There are times when I simply don't care whether the donor finds it pleasant or not. This is one of those times."

The curtain of coldness had come down so abruptly he found himself off balance and was silent for a while. When she finished replacing his red cells he said, "Well, at least you didn't refill me with something lethal. Unless you used a slow poison."

Off guard, she let a quick tight smile cross her face. "I may try that the next time. Mr. Bridges, I have no desire to be approached. By a bum or by a millionaire. I have one purpose in life, and it has no connection whatsoever with you."

"You intrigue me."

"If you knew me better, I would dismay you more than I intrigue you. Would you like orange juice, fruit punch, or cyanide?"

"Dealer's choice. Better to die quickly with you holding my hand than linger on all alone and bereft."

"The hand-holding part was over long ago." She poured him a drink. "The fruit punch is full

of toxic carcinogenic additives and tastes like vomit. I hope you enjoy it."

He took the disposable cup, carefully not letting his hand touch hers. "Any gift from your sweet cold fingers would be ambrosia, mavourneen."

"You *are* Irish."

"Sure, and me mither was an auld sod. That's where I got me gift o' baloney."

She slammed two cookies on a paper napkin onto the tray beside the donor couch. "You can leave in ten minutes." She walked briskly away to hide in the lab till he was gone. With anger and fear she realized that, until she caught herself and stiffened her spine, he had had a rear view of swinging hips as she left.

Damn the bastard. The last man who had made her laugh was in his little jar beside their daughter's, silently reproachful on the library shelf.

She felt the tears coming, bit her lip till she tasted blood. Then she scuttled to the staff Ladies' and threw up. After a while she came out, white-faced, and went into the administration office. "Gotta go. Bad PMS or a virus or something. I'll call if I can't come in in the morning."

They tried to drive her home and she waved them away. She almost ran a stop sign, she went

off the shoulder one time, but she got home.

She took a tranquilizer, wept and cursed and brooded till it took effect, then lay down for a nap. She woke after dark, choked enough food past the anorectic constriction in her throat to keep the organism going, took another tranquilizer and a hot bath, and went to bed. "Too much all at once" was the last thing she heard herself say. She got up once toward morning, went to the bathroom, came back to bed and went right back to sleep.

At first light Lila stepped out of bed, still a little mellow and fuzzy from the medication but feeling good physically, and under the circumstances surprisingly sharp mentally. She fed herself a decent breakfast, took as chilly a shower as she could stand, put on a crisp fresh uniform instead of trying to get another day out of the old one.

She went in the back door, signed in, and was finished setting up for the day before any of the other staff arrived. She carefully fended off questions and comments on her health—"My lunch must have disagreed with me"—and kept her mind and body working at top efficiency all morning. Though they were doing totally different jobs.

By late morning she had, in basic outline, the remaining weeks of her life planned. She looked forward, with more zest than she had known since the accident, to filling in the details.

"At least you didn't refill me with something lethal," he'd said. Thank you, Mr. Bridges.

She worked singlehanded, since Wednesday was a light day, through the early lunch hour, and consequently had the lounge all to herself at second lunch. She wanted to plan, but it was too distracting—background noise and jittery. Muzak, smells, no freedom to talk aloud to herself or write things down—so she simply unplugged her mind and went blank, conserving herself. Half a year before she would have thought that an Eastern mystic might be able to do that, never would have suspected she would spontaneously learn to.

At a little before two o'clock Michael Bridges glanced at his bare wrist, then looked at the bank clock across the street. He handed the little nosegay of flowers he was holding to a surprised passing child and walked rather wearily away.

Thursday she made lists, turned old and new thoughts upside down and right side up, evaluated and reevaluated with

a crystalline objectivity that astounded and pleased her. This was the home stretch.

Friday she spent more time than usual in the lab, just surveying. It wasn't time yet, but she wanted to inventory available resources. The drug cabinet was disappointingly sparse, though she did still have the prescription pad she had been meaning for months to take back to Dr. Quincy's office. As many times as she had forged his signature by instruction in the course of a normal day's business, this was a possible resource.

Dr. Quincy was one of her few guilts and regrets. After Tom's funeral, when she realized how deep in debt the medical industry had left her, she'd gone back to work for him. The healthy children brought tears to her eyes, and the first sad terminal case completely devastated her. She had to quit after three days.

She turned that thought off, too, and went on with her planning.

As the framework of her whole plan, she laid out a set of guidelines for Dunivan's death. He must not die in the plasma bank, but must die soon after her treatment. Not because of who he was but because of who she was, his death was not to require extreme or prolonged pain. It must not reflect badly

on anyone else: to the extent that she used plasma bank facilities or Dr. Quincy's prescription forms, she would have to make their noninvolvement clear in her confession.

The confession was virtually written in her head, succinctly explaining her thoughts from the time of the accident, the methods used to terminate Dunivan. She knew she could lapse into logorrhea, so she set herself a limit of one typed page.

There had to be, too, funeral instructions and some disposition of property, in memory of Tom's hatred of lawyers and undertakers and the government picking at people's remains like vultures. A bother, but not insurmountable.

She wished she could be as neat and precise in planning Dunivan's death as her own. The final scenario spread out before her:

The evening of the day she did away with Dunivan, she would go home, shower and dress in something comfortable and nice. She would have a light, pleasant, and tasty supper. Two glasses of wine with supper. As a matter of courtesy to those who had to clear up her remains, she would void her bowels and bladder and take one tranquilizer, both for comfort and, with the alcohol, to

depress vital functions a bit and help her along on the way out.

Her confession and instructions would be on the night table.

She considered first an overdose of her own prescription drugs, but there was a dark and smothering quality to the rest they brought that she really didn't want as her last earthly experience.

She thought of a neat longitudinal incision in a vein down her wrist, but there was a possibility she might clot too quickly—she had good platelets—and totally embarrass herself by surviving. Besides, she would have to collect the blood in an open container, a dishpan or such, and someone could step in it or kick it over.

Above all, she must die for sure. She couldn't handle a courtroom scene, time in jail, then—she was pretty sure—a couple of years in a state hospital, then back where she started from. She knew she was coldly sane, but didn't think a jury would see her that way.

She finally decided on a blood needle and tube leading to a five-liter jug she could get hold of without trouble. And she could load up on aspirin before supper to thin her blood.

She wanted them to find her not too soon and not too late. She had to be good and dead,



but not decomposed and noxious. She could leave a message on her answering machine for the plasma bank to hear when they called to see why she hadn't shown up, but there was too much risk of premature discovery. She could leave an overnight message on someone's office answering machine for the morning, but it might get garbled, erased, overlooked, or prematurely audited.

A letter could get lost or delayed in the mail. But she could use the postman in another way: leave a note in the mailbox with the flag up asking him to call the police and telling him where the key was. It would be inconvenient for him, but not an unforgivable imposition under the circumstances. She would be found by late morning, and all would be neatly wrapped up. She smiled a thin smile of satisfaction, as if she'd solved a puzzle or balanced an equation.

That left the specifics of killing Dunivan, basically what toxin to use. When she first conceived the plan, she thought of an aeroembolism, but that would kill him on the couch and possibly result in her being held for questioning and unable to implement her own death. No, it had to be a slow but not too slow poison. Thanks again, Mr. Bridges.

Something in his juice, possibly—but she really wanted to inject the seeds of his death into his life's blood. As he had done to her.

Pathogens, maybe a little staph for septicemia: no, that could poison recipients before it was detected. Antabuse seemed more hopeful: that or something analogous that would react with the alcohol he would ingest as soon as the front desk paid him for his plasma. It wouldn't be wise to try to get the Antabuse itself on a pediatric prescription blank, but the principle was sound.

She started smuggling various things home from the office: bags and tubing and needles, last year's *Physician's Desk Reference*, which was quite recent enough to contain the drug interactions she needed to know about.

During the time she was planning, both Dunivan and Bridges kept coming in. Bridges was coming in clean-shaven now, and dressed not too badly. She assiduously courted Dunivan and did her best to avoid Bridges, but one morning he sneaked up on her blind side.

"Sure, me dear, and it's weary I'm gettin' o' bein' stuck by strangers twice a week in vain hopes of a glimpse of you," he

said as she came up to his couch.

Mellowed and relaxed at having her life in order for the first time since her death, she laughed before she could stop herself. "You idiot," she said. "You're a complete fake. You're not a bum and you're not even Irish—your dialect keeps slipping."

"Have lunch with me and I'll confess all." She scrubbed his inner elbow with more vigor than necessary. "I think you've got that top layer of skin off now."

"If I went to lunch with you, it would be for the food, *not* for the company."

"Sold! I'll be outside the front door at twelve thirty."

"I take the early lunch hour."

"Very well, I'll be outside the front door at eleven thirty."

"But I brought a sandwich today."

"You may bring it with you if you don't like fresh local seafood or prime rib. I'm not easily embarrassed."

She missed the vein and plunged the needle deep into the flesh. He gasped but didn't shout. "Oh, Lord, I'm sorry. Michael, I *didn't* do that on purpose."

His face was blanched and beaded with sweat, but he grinned a tight grin. "In heroic epics, one always expects an

ordeal or two on the way to the fair maid. Though, regrettably, it's often the fair maid herself who imposes them."

"Hush." She shut him out, focused her full attention on the needle, got it in straight and painlessly. "I'm not a fair maid, I'm a miserable secondhand person. I'm going to lunch with you out of guilt and remorse. Or for food. Or to get away from this miserable place. Whatever. *Not* to get to know you, or for you to get to know me. I don't plan to be particularly pleasant. If you ever did get to know me, you would not like what you saw."

"Eleven thirty?"

"All right." She didn't get off till eleven forty-five. She wasn't quite sure why she had done that to him.

She was more pleasant than she intended to be. In her new frame of mind, she found she was as curious about Bridges as she had been about methods of murder and suicide.

"Are you writing a novel?" she asked over salad.

He shook his head. "Not at the moment, though I find my . . . literary *maturity* rapidly approaching. It started as a feature story, it worked into a series of documentaries—on street people, drugs, prostitution, runaways, unpunished

crimes—they're all in one string, there's no stopping place between them. My patient editor is helping me negotiate national syndication, we've got an agent trying to pre-sell a re-write of the series in hardback. There's a novel in it, and more, when I . . . get my literary and philosophical perspectives better established."

"Unpunished crimes I could tell you a lot about." She quickly changed the subject. "I'm quite serious about avoiding any and all personal acquaintance. You're a free lunch. And now that you've blown your cover, you're no longer even an intellectual challenge." She drew back down the frosty curtain. For a moment he was afraid she was ready to leave.

"Ah, but there are unexplored depths you'll never be sure of until you investigate them." He spoke as lightly as he could, but she could tell he was bruised, and had a twinge of remorse. Why do I feel guilty and want to laugh around him? she asked herself. "But enough about me. Tell me all about your own charmin' self."

"Closed book. If you want, for whatever masochistic reason, to watch me finish eating lunch, you'll leave it closed." Another brief wince on his face, another twinge of guilt on her part.

"Very well. I'll just amuse

meself watchin' the dust collect on your lovely binding."

She nearly choked on a piece of lettuce suppressing a laugh. "Damn you!" The waiter put another glass of Chablis before her.

By the end of the meal he was mellow, solemn inner thoughts crowding his brow, and she was tipsy or the next thing to it. He lightly laid his hand on hers, and she pulled quickly away, shaking her head.

"Uh-uh," she said. "Don't try to get close. I let you get me drunk enough to get me off guard. But you're not drunk enough to handle what you might turn up."

"Burdens weigh less when they're shared."

She lifted her chin and stuck it out, flared her nostrils, lifted the corners of her mouth in what was more rictus than smile. "Knight in shining armor."

"Don't belittle what's real and honest."

She was near tears, but not for the old reasons. "My life expectancy is very short. Like weeks."

This time, when he took her hand, he held it in a deathgrip, his eyes wide. "Did you catch something from one of your . . . clients?"

She shook her head impatiently. "Nothing the least bit

like that. And, as I've said before, none of your goddamned business." She had strength to fight off tears, but not for much longer. She was poised on the edge of the chair, ready to walk out on him.

He took the exit line away from her. "Time to sober you up," he said, glancing at his watch, "so they won't think you're one of the donors. Hurry up and finish your coffee." She obediently drained the cup and they left. He walked her the long way round back to the plasma bank.

That night she nearly wore the *PDR* out, and at last settled on what the patent medicine commercials called a combination of ingredients: a slow-acting, long-lasting depressant that she could administer in the juice, a faster-acting one she could transmit through the reconstituted blood by way of treated saline solution. Half an hour or so after Dunivan left, they would begin interacting with each other in his bloodstream. They would both interact with alcohol, and at about the same time, according to her estimates of his probable behavior. Her mix wouldn't quite kill him without his contributing the third element of the lethal dose. Poetic justice. She checked and rechecked her

arithmetic and was satisfied.

The next morning she wrote herself a nice prescription on Dr. Quincy's blank for one of the medications, and that afternoon called her own doctor with symptoms that, with subtle leading, brought her a phone prescription for the other. She picked up both on her way home, her prescription for "Mary Ann Wilson"—she couldn't use Tibby's name—unquestioned.

Thursday she experimented, recalculating, measuring and tasting. By early afternoon she had exactly what she wanted: a saline bag—no longer sterile, but she said to herself, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn!"—spiked with a sublethal dose of Drug A; a one-ounce vial with an easy-mixing solution of Drug B, also sublethal; and her new handbag with spacious inside pocket, which now contained both drugs ready to use. She could have them out between the time she saw Dunivan at the doorway and the time he got to her couch.

Sober and serious as she was, she was also exalted. Full of energy, she outlined, wrote, edited, and final-typed her confession, leaving underlined blanks for filling in final details of time. It gave all the reasons and means, exonerated all others, and left barely enough room for her signature.

The burial instructions were brief and simple: cremation, with her ashes, Tom's, and Tibby's to be mixed and spaded into the rose garden, law permitting, otherwise to be entrusted to her executor(s) for future disposition. Tom believed you could never put too much bone meal on roses, and she smiled; for an instant, a smile of warm memory.

This left one final knotty question. Her divorced father hadn't been heard from since she was in her teens, her mother had died a year before Tom and Tibby, and she had no siblings.

Tom's widowed mother had never accepted her. She had done no more than duty gestures for Tibby, had flown in for Tom's memorial service and taken the next flight back, and was hardly worth bothering with. As a matter of social propriety she would expect, Lila supposed, a farewell note. She laughed a dry shallow laugh at the thought.

She shut the door on the whole subject when she realized how near tears she was, seeing herself as a friendless orphan. As the friendless orphan she was. Not egocentric tears, but a kind of third-person compassion for this suffering self. She couldn't handle that right now, with the mother-and-daughter flavor of it.

Lila was digging in the freezer for supper ideas when it hit her, with laughter. She giggled in quiet hysteria, tears starting down her cheeks. She realized the calmness and satisfaction on one side were balanced precariously with being near the ragged edge on the other; she shut the door on the laughter, but held back a sardonic smile.

"He wants inside the book of my life. Okay, he gets the whole thing. In memoriam." She put the lamb chop and box of peas back in the freezer, forgetting all about food, and went to her desk. In minutes she had a holograph of her will roughed out, naming Michael Bridges executor and sole heir. She had details to fill in from his card in the file at the office, but the job was basically done. The last loose end tied up.

She didn't know how much of her motivation was kindness and how much cruelty, and on that question too she shut the door.

Then her appetite came back. Not emptiness and gnawing, but real appetite, she realized. She was on her way back to the freezer when the phone rang.

Probably a misdial, she told herself, since only a handful of people had the number, but she always panicked a little when it rang.

"Hello?" Cool and chilly.

"Ah, Lila, me lovely fragrant spring blossom! I've been thinkin' you might not be feedin' your pretty self well enough, and perhaps could use a decent dinner, and for all I care maybe even a flick afterward."

She giggled. "Just because I'm laughing doesn't mean I'm not highly offended. How did you get this number?"

"Same way I get the numbers of crooked politicians and Mafia bosses and reclusive celebrities. Illegal, but effective. But I wouldn't want you to be an accessory after the fact, so I'll not be tellin' ya."

"Stop that horrible fake Irish dialect."

"Ah, the County Kilkerry accent may be false, but the invitation's real. Anywhere you want—I've a two weeks' paycheck burnin' a hole in me pocket."

"You dope. In that case you can bring salad stuff and a decent wine. You just happened to catch me in one of my almost unheard of good moods."

He whistled. "In that case open the door—I'm on me way in."

"No! Don't you dare show up in less than an hour!"

"As you say, m'dear. Any choice of wine?"

"Use your own judgment. I don't *suppose* you'll have any

trouble finding the house?"

"Sweet flower, I know every antique brick and twig of ivy and wrought-iron curlicue on it. Remind me to polish that delightful lion's head door knocker for you."

"You bastard."

"Fifty-nine minutes." He hung up before she could find a last word.

Detachedly Lila watched herself start a roast, shower and shave her legs, brush her hair glossy, dress in a pretty flowered housedress she hadn't worn since before she died. She had no idea whether she was being ingenuous, satirical, gracious, sadistic, or what. She knew there was some gallows humor in it, some kind of outrageous apocalyptic showmanship, but she suspected there was more.

Michael Bridges arrived with cut flowers sticking out of a grocery bag containing half the produce department and three bottles of wine. "I didn't know exactly what you'd need, so I shotgunned it," he explained. As she led him to the kitchen he said, "If I'd known all this time you were a girl I'd have been pursuing you even more avidly."

She turned in the doorway, eyes flashing, and demanded: "What exactly was that supposed to mean?"



"It means I was too bashful to say what I really meant. Which is that I see a femininity in you I hadn't seen before, and it's very becoming and attractive."

She felt herself flushing. "Thanks, I suppose. I *was* a woman once. Now get out of my kitchen until I call you."

"Yessum, Miz Lila."

"Go. If you make me laugh, I'll send you home hungry."

They ate well and drank too much. He helped her clear up, tried to kiss her in the kitchen and was shoved away, and they took coffee and port to the living room.

When he put down his empty cup, he realized that now he had to go, or change the scenario. "There's plenty of time for a movie."

Lila shook her head. "I have to work tomorrow. I'm going to bed." Then, as if it were an afterthought, she added, "Do you want to stay or go?"

She had the satisfaction of seeing him off balance for a change. Then he recovered and said, "Given the choice, I'll stay. Must I take the couch, or have you a guest room?"

Unsmiling she said: "I'm offering you what you've been working so hard for. You've earned it. I won't wiggle my hips, but I'll spread my legs.

Take it or leave it."

He looked at her for half a minute, then softly responded: "Any other woman, I'd turn her over my knee, lecture her on good manners and morals, and walk away. You . . . if that's all I can have of you, I'll take it rather than nothing."

"Come to the bedroom in five minutes. You can take the cups to the kitchen while you're waiting."

He obeyed her instructions. She made many conditions, at first wouldn't let him kiss her on the mouth, and, physically, he could have found it disappointing. But once she called him "Tom," and afterward she wept on his chest and told him less than he already knew of Tom and Tibby and let him kiss the tears off her eyelids. Then, sometime after the late mockingbirds had finished and before the early ones began, she woke him, shoved him abruptly away, and told him to go.

"May I dress here, or should I carry my clothes out to the street?"

"Dress in the living room. Then go. Be sure the door's locked behind you." He gathered up his clothes and walked around toward her side of the bed. She was afraid he would try to kiss her, but he only stood over her and said, "Good night, my sweet lilac blossom. And

thank you for the gift it hurt to give." Then he was gone. She heard him fumbling in the dark as he dressed, then the click of the front door locking, then in a minute his old Toyota starting up.

The next morning she found one of his socks by the bedroom chair. She couldn't leave it there to look at and she couldn't pick it up and put it in her laundry, so she kicked it under the chair. "I'll worry about that tomorrow," she said.

**D**univan missed his regular day. He was usually in a little before lunch on Friday, and as the day went on she became more and more anxious lest he had stopped coming.

Also, thankfully, Bridges didn't show. She hoped he had given up his street-people act and she wouldn't, at least, have to fend him off at work. Though she didn't assume she was free of him.

Nor was she, even in his absence. She had to keep slamming the door, as if it were Fibber McGee's closet, on all the muck from the back of her mind that last night had stirred up: Why had she let him in her house? Why had she taken him to bed, what was she trying to prove, who was she trying to punish, what did he think of

her? And why the *hell* had she spilled her guts to him? The only sane and intelligent thing she had done all evening and night was to send him away.

By quitting time she was a nervous wreck. She had a couple of scares in the traffic, ate a slice of cold roast for supper, and drank enough of the leftover port to numb her brain and remind her how little sleep she had had the night before. She was in bed with a paperback by nine. With, beside her, a ghost that might have been Tom or Michael or Fate. She realized that, unless she wanted to operate left-handed, she would have to lie where Michael had lain when it was time for her to die.

She was lying there, thumb marking her place in the paperback, wondering whether she dared add a sleeping pill to the port, when she fell asleep with the light on.

Dunivan stayed away Saturday, as did Michael, and Lila regained some equilibrium even as her anxiety increased.

When the call finally came Sunday evening, she felt a sudden flash of anger at herself for how she had been waiting for it.

"Hello." As flat as she could manage.

"Lila?" It was Michael's voice,

but deferent and tentative. "Ordinarily I'd have called the lady the next day, but you seemed to need some space."

"I did and I still do. Thank you for your concern. Goodbye."

"Farewell, then." He hung up before she did, and that irritated her a little.

But later on she asked herself, "Why are you *treating* the poor bastard that way?" She knew she was leading him on, for all her showy pretense of rejection. She dimly realized she was punishing him as proxy, though she totally blocked, forgot even the train of thought leading up to it, when it came to the matter of whom he was proxy for.

One morning the next week she saw Dunivan with another phlebotomist; he had come in during her break.

Then, the week after, she gave in—because she fainted in the kitchen getting ready for work Monday—to the queasy feeling she had had, nausea and fatigue and crying spells. She put it down to stress and treated herself; she felt terminal; but she didn't want medical verification until she was ready to go.

The week after that they made her take a light schedule, and she accepted it. Then partway through the following week a thought hit her that was like a

kick in the stomach.

She put off acting on the thought for a day, then the next morning she slipped into a restroom with a specimen bottle, took the kit out of her purse, and gritted her teeth. She watched the color change, squeezed tears from under her squinted lids, and screamed in a barely audible whisper, "God-dammit, oh, goddammit, hurry up, Dunivan, hurry up!"

She surreptitiously went through Dunivan's old records and saw what might be a pattern of binges. Or of times in jail. His card for the period had a hiatus between the time of the accident and the trial. Her stomach knotted when she realized the significance of the missing dates, and her urge to kill renewed itself in sharp clarity.

So she could wait this one out, and she did.

He came in early the following week, looking worse than she had ever seen him. He was so jaundiced she wondered how he had ever got past the front desk.

She was minding the back desk, so she had him captive. She did the paperwork quickly, pricked his finger and flicked the droplet of blood out of the capillary tube into the little beaker of copper sulfate solution. She held her breath,

prayed, used psychokinesis, and finally the dark globule sank slowly through the blue liquid. Even then, she knew it was free bilirubin in the blood and not red cell count that had sunk it.

"Just barely made it today, Mr. Dunivan. If your hemoglobin were any lower I'd have to send you away." She knew that with his patent jaundice she shouldn't have touched him—his eyeballs were yellow and his skin repulsively greenish under the fluorescent lighting—and that having gone this far she should have centrifuged the sample and suggested a referral to the clinic. "I'll take you myself. Get in the first couch over there and I'll be there in a minute."

She gathered the paperwork and fastened it to the clipboard, reached under the desk for her bag, and followed him to the couch.

She lifted his clammy hand and counted his pulse. Weak, noticeably arrhythmic, 116.

She put the manometer cuff on, pumped it up, had to listen twice before she was sure. Diastolic 98, systolic 124, less than thirty points' difference where there should be fifty.

And he stank. Not just stale booze and dirty body and sour clothes. More and worse, something metabolic.

She wrote the figures down,

glanced up from the clipboard, and at the other end of the room saw Michael, very serious, slowly shaking his head. She dropped the pen, felt the blood drain from her face and would have passed out if she hadn't abruptly sat on the stool. She looked up again and he was gone. He came and went so quickly he might have been an hallucination.

Lila took several deep breaths and recovered enough to speak. She reached a decision, a snap decision but perhaps preordained, and spoke.

"You still don't remember me, do you, Sam Dunivan?" He looked at her in bleary confusion. "Do you remember killing my husband and daughter eight months ago?"

His yellow eyes widened round, and his face turned a duskiest green.

"I was going to kill you today," she went on. "I have the weapon right here." She gestured at her purse. Paralyzed with horror, he looked as if he were trying to crawl off the couch by sliding like a slug. "But I just realized I no longer give a good goddam about you, one way or another." She reached into the purse; he sat up on the couch and cringed away from her, but it was only her wallet she brought out.

She reached into it and pulled

out a ten and a five. "Your plasma's not worth buying. Your blood is falling apart, your red cells are crumbling, your liver's no good. Here's the fifteen dollars you would have got for it. You can buy booze with it and finish drinking yourself to death. Buy a cheap gun and blow out what brains you have left. Or even use it for carfare to get to the clinic or hospital."

She handed him the money, stood up and walked to the restroom. She breathed deeply, washed her face in cold water, decided she wasn't going to faint. Emotionally, she was in limbo. She knew something like cleansing tears, black despair, or hysterical laughter was ahead, but she was too drained for them now.

Lila made it through what was left of the afternoon. She left a few minutes early and got ahead of the rush, and when she got home Michael's car was there in front of the house.

"Damn him!" she growled. She parked in the driveway, went to the door and tried it. It was locked, but if he could get her phone number and read her mind he was certainly capable, ethically and technically, of picking a lock.

She let herself in, called him and got no answer. She went back and looked out the kitchen window and he was in the rose

garden in shorts and T-shirt, pruning and weeding. She felt a sudden sense of intrusion and outrage at his presence in the garden she and Tom had put in together, whose flowers had delighted Tibby.

Angered, she unbolted the door and stalked out to where he was kneeling. "You're trespassing," she said curtly.

He smiled up at her. "Ah, and 'tis a good day to ye, acushla! . . . A shame to let a fine garden o' roses, Granada and Queen Elizabeth—I'm a Loyalist—and all, go to waste for lack o' lovin' care."

She laughed, for the first time not resenting it. Then, seriously: "This is a very private space, Michael."

"I figured it was, that's why I'm givin' it such first-rate personal attention."

"You intrusive egotistical bastard."

"Ye've been talkin' to me mither!" He flashed a wide grin, then went on more soberly: "I plan to intrude even more, for reasons I consider adequate to excuse the discourtesy."

"Just a minute. First explain your intrusion this afternoon."

He raised his eyebrows: "You mean right now?"

She shook her head impatiently. "At the office. Around three or four this afternoon."

"Not guilty, your Honor. I

was already intrudin' here. Since about half-past two—I meant to surprise you with the finished product, but it's a longer job than I figured, to do it *right*." He knit his brows. "I was thinking of you *very* seriously along about then. Frustrated, wanting to shake wrong ideas out of your head before they mess you up worse."

She didn't comment, and he went on: "Which I'm going to do now. I should have before but I was too dense and imperceptive to see it till the small hours this morning, and I've been mulling it over since."

"Do you have a permit to meddle in my personal affairs?"

"I granted myself a license to that effect." She started to protest. "Now, hush. I'm serious now, dead serious. I don't know why I was so dumb it took me weeks to see it. You've been planning to do away with Dunivan, haven't you?"

She tightened her lips and felt her face grow pale, but said nothing.

"And then yourself, that would be the only way out that you, you personally, could take." He paused for a deep breath; she wanted to speak out but couldn't. "You've been telling me that, one way or another, practically since we met."

"Michael—"

"Hush, love... I had to do

some deep pondering on this, but I've a proposition for you. Keep your sweet little cold hands off him, and I promise you he'll die. Not that it wouldn't be a mercy, the poor miserable wretch is falling apart. Just don't ask me any questions, I won't want to tell you."

"Michael! You couldn't just coldly—"

"Couldn't I now? I've got very street-smart in a few months here. I could do it myself, with impunity, neatly and painlessly. For the price of a week-end's worth of fix, I could have it done. If you truly want him dead that badly."

"Michael..."

"Don't give me a moral lecture, missy. You're ready to do it yourself, and add the sin of suicide on top of it. For me, it would be a very simple moral choice: his life and yours both, one worthless life and one good one, or his alone. No question as to what my decision would be. Just be damn sure that's what you want."

She smiled a tight weary smile. "Are you thirsty?" He nodded; she went in and brought back iced tea, and they sat on a wrought-iron bench overlooking the half-weeded rosebed.

"I started to kill him this afternoon. That's when I saw you— were you truly not there?"

"Cross me heart. 'Twas your conscience manifestin' itself, externalized as an hallucination o' me, the archetypal moral authority. Happens all the time."

She giggled. "Idiot. . . . Seriously, he *is* falling apart. Advanced hepatitis at least, impending liver collapse, maybe hepatic CA. . . . Michael, can you feel pity for someone you hate, you've hated so much it's become the center of your life?"

"Compassion is for who you love. Pity is for who you don't love, nor respect. Don't let him be the center of your life any longer. He's not good enough for that exalted status."

"He isn't. I'm suddenly, almost, *indifferent*."

They sat there silent for a while. She discovered with mild surprise that they had been holding hands; she wasn't ready to squeeze his, but left hers in it.

Finally Lila said, surprising herself again, "I'm pregnant, Michael."

She felt his hand tighten on hers, but he kept his voice level. "No one since me, I hope. No-

body before me, I'm sure."

"No one but you, since Tom, till now." She saw him wanting to speak, but he was silent and she was glad of it. "Michael, this place is full of ghosts. Or *I'm* full of ghosts."

"I felt 'em, this afternoon. We Irish have the second sight, you know." She looked at his face, and it was serious, no insouciant grin. "I think we're pretty compatible. The ghosts and me, I mean. We share a common interest."

After a while she said, "I'm a psychological mess, still."

"I've known that was part of the package. I see favorable changes."

She smiled up at him. A small smile, but no longer tight. "If I said, 'Hold me all night but don't do anything,' could you?"

"For now. Not forever."

"I mean for now. Day at a time, play it by ear."

"I can handle that."

It was days later before they learned that Dunivan, that same afternoon, had staggered into the side of a hurrying ready-mix concrete truck.



# UNSOLVED

by *Lassiter Wren*  
and *Randle McKay*

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the May issue.

One of the most interesting phases of criminological study is the sign language of professional crooks of bygone days. Hans Gross, the famous German student of crime, traced back certain graphic signs of thieves, robbers, and incendiaryists to a fifteenth century origin. Just as knights had distinctive signs for their coats of arms, professional criminals had special symbols which they used in lieu of names. Moreover, they used many strange characters and markings which conveyed meaning to other criminals—and of course to those officers of the law who were astute enough in those days to deduce the meaning. But the latter, apparently, were few.

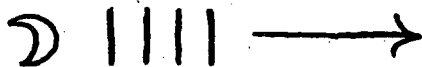
A few excellent examples of communication in this sign language are still to be found in obscure places in Germany, England, and other European countries. The system was in use even as late as the last century. It was by no means confined to gypsies, as has been popularly supposed. A professional robber might walk into a town, observe the lay of the land, and then leave a sign language communication on some fence or barn or wayside post which would soon recruit him accomplices for a daring robbery.



This strange group above was an invitation to a crime. The crude parrot, drawn with a single stroke, was the robber's own distinctive mark, indicating that he was a talkative, loquacious fellow. The church was the object of the robber. The key meant burglary. The three stones on the ground were a symbol of St. Stephen the martyr (who was killed by stoning), and referred to the date of the intended robbery, namely, St. Stephen's Day, the 26th of December. The final sign, supposed to be an infant in swaddling clothes, was intended to convey the idea of the birth of Jesus, which in turn suggested December 25th. This, being the day before the intended robbery, was unquestionably the date set for a meeting of the band for the purpose of laying definite plans. In brief, the message said:

"I, the Parrot, want to rob the church in this village on December 26th and need help for the job. Any would-be accomplices can meet me near this spot on Christmas Day and discuss ways and means."

For the amusement of modern readers, here is another invitation to a crime, not so hard to fathom as the Parrot's. It was found cut into the side of a large log in the Thuringian Forest, Germany, and had undoubtedly been there for many years. It was discovered later that an epidemic of incendiarism had existed in the vicinity many years previously, and it may therefore be assumed to refer to an incendiary attack.



The question to be answered is:  
*What did the invitation to the crime say?*

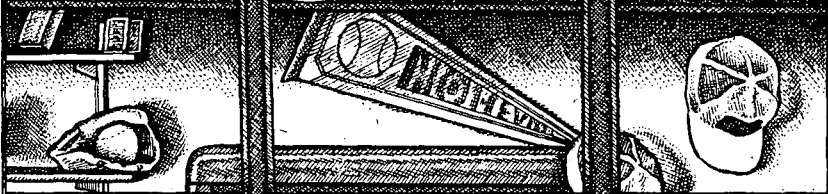
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See page 96 for the solution to the March puzzle.

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FICTION

# Pouring the Foundations of a Nightmare



by Nina Kiriki Hoffman



Illustration by Ron Chironna

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**Y**ou can get inside a house and walk around, look out all the windows, knock on all the walls, open all the doors. You can *know* a house.

You can't crawl inside a person, even if you decorated some of the rooms in him yourself. The rooms you think you know change around a lot, and some of the walls are solid, and some melt, and you never know which are which until the person's grown up and everything gets set in concrete.

And sometimes you don't even know what's inside your own house. Opening locked doors can be risky.

I kept thinking my best friend Garrett and I were looking out the same eyes, seeing the same views, but we weren't, especially after we turned twelve. He changed all the furniture inside, threw out the stuff we did together, like skateboards and video games and costumes and comic books. I couldn't understand the stuff he put in there instead.

He had nightmares when we were little, and after he stopped having them, I started. Most of my nightmares are about dead people. Garrett's used to be, too; I know, because I made some of his nightmares up. I'd pour the foundations, and he'd build the nightmares on them. And all the time, I was telling myself something, and I didn't find out what until just lately, after I talked to Garrett's dead brother Danny.

My house is tall and gray and goes up straight from the ground to the roof. It's like a big shoebox with an attic on top. My parents and I and our housekeeper, Mrs. Garrison, live in my house. Garrett's house is yellow, and twistier; you can get lost in it. When he still lived there, it was his parents, him, and his brother Danny. Now it's a bunch of apartments, and seven people live there. Our houses stand next door to each other on one of the streets in Spores Ferry, Oregon, that has lots of trees on it, with strips taken out of the sidewalk for plants and pieces of lawn. In our neighborhood, you can ride a bike or a motorcycle through the stop sign intersections without stopping, because usually there's no traffic coming. Before the accident, I sometimes went through intersections without stopping; Garrett never went through without stopping; and Garrett's older brother Danny always went through without stopping.

We spent most of our time at Garrett's house when he was still living there. He and his parents have been gone for a year now

—they moved to Florida—and I haven't been to Garrett's house since they left.

A lot of my nightmares come from Garrett's house.

We knew somebody died in Garrett's house. We heard his parents talking about it. Garrett had nightmares about it from the time he was five. One day when I was really mad at him, I made up a story about the person who died. "Her name was Mad Lucy," I said as we sat on his bed sucking stolen chocolate chips and getting brown smears on Garrett's *Mad Magazines*, "and she had three children, and they all lived in the same room, and at night she would stand in the doorway and listen to them breathing apart from each other. One night she thought she couldn't hear one of the babies breathing. She got a knife and stabbed one baby. Only one of the others was breathing. She stabbed the next baby. One of them was still breathing. She stabbed the third baby, and then none of them was breathing, so she came up to *this room* and hanged herself."

I never had to tell him that story again. It got built into him. When we got on our bikes to ride to school in the morning and he had bloodshot eyes, and looked too pale, and couldn't listen or talk very well, I knew he'd dreamed about Mad Lucy again, and I felt awful. His nightmares didn't end until Danny went through an intersection on his motorcycle without stopping for the last time.

The Halloween after Danny died, I dared Garrett to visit Danny's grave with me in the cemetery, and Garrett just laughed. He said okay, he didn't care.

The night was cool and misty. The street lights were yellow; every night looked like Halloween. Dead maple leaves had drifted against the curbs in wet, slippery heaps. The air smelled good from the wood people were burning in their fireplaces. We rode our bikes to the cemetery and locked them to the fence, then sneaked in through a gap in the hedge. We'd passed a lot of grownups taking little kids around trick-or-treating. Garrett and I were twelve. I had wanted to be a wolf man again this year, but he said that was stupid. "Grow up, Clark," he had said.

"Free candy, Garrett," I had said.

"It's just too stupid," he had said, and it had only been a month and a half since Danny died, so I decided not to push it. I ended up daring him to go to the graveyard instead. Maybe I was thinking if he'd only have nightmares again he'd turn back into the Garrett I knew, not this calm guy who smiled and acted mature and didn't

get mad any more. Not this guy who told me he had to stay in and do homework on Saturday nights when I asked him to go to the movies with me.

We were walking along the road in the cemetery, and everything was dark and quiet. I started thinking about all the dead people under the ground. Maybe they were mad at the living, and maybe Halloween was the one night a year when they could come up and do something about it. Maybe that fresh earth smell came from somebody digging their way up. I thought about skeleton hands poking up out of earth shadowed by moonlight on tombstones, like in the *Thriller* video. The hands would drag us down against the earth and smother us, and then we would turn into skeletons ourselves, and grab other live people. When I heard these yowls like ghouls fighting, it was me who jumped and Garrett who stayed steady. "It's all right, Clark," he said. "The dead won't hurt you."

Garrett said that.

I felt strange. All my fear just pissed away, and what I had left was numbness. We never made it to Danny's grave. We turned around and left. On the way home I watched all those little ghosts and witches and vampires and werewolves and princesses and fairies running from house to house, and I thought, how stupid. Then I went to bed and had my first nightmare, full of skeleton hands reaching for me. By morning the big numb place in the middle of me had come unfrozen, and I just felt really mad because I'd missed out on all that candy. I wanted to punch Garrett.

Pretty soon after that, Garrett and his folks moved away. Their house got remodeled into apartments, and a cousin showed up to live in the basement and be the landlord.

The landlord at Garrett's house looked a lot like Danny in disguise, and did all the yard work after dark. He wore a beard and glasses, and underneath it all, he looked like Danny.

I dreamed about him. In my dreams, he crept all around the house, through the bushes, rustle, rustle. He was one of those ghouls from *Night of the Living Dead*, and he wanted to eat me. I heard his fingers scrabbling on the walls, heard him twisting the knob of the front door downstairs, heard glass break in a window, imagined him coming in to get me. Maybe he'd nibble off my fingers first, then bite my face. Maybe he'd go straight for my guts, rip them out of my stomach and suck them up like spaghetti. Every night after I turned off my light I lay in bed and worried about the guy next door. The shadows on the ceiling moved and I wanted to

yell. Some nights I talked to Mom and Dad, even after they went to bed. Three times my dad went downstairs to check the windows and the doors for me and tell me everything was all right. After that he stopped checking. He just said everything was all right, go to sleep. So I went back to my room. Usually I didn't go to sleep.

One summer night, I sat in my upstairs window a couple of hours after ten o'clock lights out and watched the guy next door weed. The air smelled like lawns being watered, and smoke from the field-burning outside the city. The yellow street light shone brightly on the yard next door. The landlord knelt in the flower-bed near our yard—all the flowers were closed—and pulled weeds from the earth, not like my dad, jerking them out and cussing at them, but just pouring water on the ground, feeling down around the plants' roots, and then pulling them out gently, like he didn't want to hurt them even though he was killing them. He worked slowly. I thought, Danny wasn't like that. Danny never did anything slowly. He was always racing around like a madman.

I thought I could just watch him a while and then lie in bed and shiver all night, wondering when he was coming to get me. Or I could go out there and ask him, get it over with.

I unhooked the screen and climbed out the window onto the branch of the maple tree I had always used as an escape route before I got so scared of the landlord cousin. I sneaked down the tree as quietly as I could, but when I reached the ground and turned around, there was the cousin, sitting back on his heels, staring at me through his clear glasses.

Eat me now, I thought. I'm tired of waiting. I heard my heart in my ears, thudding like a big drum.

I looked back at my house. I wished Mom or Dad would be at the window watching. The cousin couldn't do anything if anybody was watching, could he? But there was nobody at any of the windows in my house, just a lot of curtains with dark behind them. I looked at his house, the house I used to play in with Garrett, to see if any of the tenants was at a window. The lights were on in the back downstairs apartment, but the curtains were closed. The other three apartments were dark.

"Hi," I said.

"Hel-hello," the cousin said, his voice starting out normal and then dropping down deep. He leaned over and pulled another weed.

He wasn't acting very dangerous, but I still wished I'd remembered to bring my Swiss Army knife with me. I didn't know what



to do next. I wondered what his teeth looked like. I hadn't seen him smile in the year I'd been watching him.

"Have you heard anything from Garrett?" I asked.

"What?" He sat back again and stared at me.

"Garrett," I said. "Your cousin? Used to live in your house. He was my best friend."

"No," he said, still in his deep voice. He stared at me and I stared at him. He didn't smell like rotting meat or even like garbage. He didn't have claws on his fingers, and he didn't look too strong. He was just a guy. Just a guy I'd spent a year being terrified of.

"Oh," I said. "Oh, well." I turned back to the tree and put my arms around it, ready to hug my way up to the lowest branch, and then I realized I was shaking and didn't have any strength in my arms. I let go of the tree. Nothing like failing at something important in front of a scary stranger.

"Can you get in downstairs?" he asked, and it was Danny's voice coming from behind me.

I didn't turn around. "Everything's locked," I mumbled to the tree. I had checked from the inside. Twice.

"I'll give you a boost." Then he was right behind me. I pushed my face against the bark, hugged the tree again, and waited for him to bite down on the back of my neck or tear my arms off.

"Clark," he said. He touched my shoulder. His fingers felt wet and cool through my T-shirt.

I hugged the tree as hard as I could.

"I can't help you up if you won't let go."

After a long moment I let go of the tree. Maybe that would make it easier for him to carry me off. Maybe that was why he was waiting. He'd take me into the basement and butcher me in the bathtub. I turned around and looked at his face, then thought what have I got to lose, reached up, and pulled his beard. It came off. I dropped it and put my hands over my mouth.

After a minute he took off his glasses and put them in his shirt pocket. Then he peeled off the mustache. He was Danny, all right.

"Are you going to eat me?" I asked through my hands.

"Nope." He leaned over, picked up the beard, and stuffed it in a pants pocket. "You going to tell on me?"

"Tell what?" I lowered my hands.

"Well, who I am, I guess. What else could you tell?"

"You're dead, and you only come out at night."

"Oh. That."

"It was all a bunch of lies, wasn't it? You're not really dead, are you? It's like a spy movie or something where you're a secret witness with a new identity, huh." I was talking too fast, hoping what I was saying was true.

He smiled. He bent and made a cup with his hands for my foot. "Go to bed, Clark," he said.

I stepped into his hands and he lifted me until I could grab the lowest branch and climb up. I sat on the branch and looked down at him. "Danny?"

"What?"

"It's a spy movie, not a horror movie, right?"

"Maybe it's a comedy." He got his beard and mustache out and pasted them back on. "Doesn't this look like a comedy?" He put on his round-framed glasses and peered up at me. "Actually, I have heard from Garrett. He's fine. He asked me about you. What do you want me to tell him?"

"I lost his address, and I miss him."

"Wait a sec. Don't go away. I'll get it for you," said Danny, and he strolled across the yard and walked down the basement steps in back.

I put my arm around the tree trunk and waited. Danny was dead and he only came out at night. Garrett knew and he never told me. What kind of best friend was that?

Danny came back and handed me a slip of paper with an address on it. I put it in my pocket. "Thanks," I said. "Are you a zombie?"

"Nope."

"A ghoul?"

"Nope. What's the difference?"

"I think zombies *are* dead people and ghouls *eat* dead people, but I'm not sure. Are you a werewolf?"

"Be real, Clark. I have to finish weeding, okay?"

"Am I even warm?"

"No," he said. "Good night." He turned around and went back to his sleeping flowers.

I climbed up the maple tree and went in through my window and then sat there, watching him work in the soft yellow light. He was Danny, and he wasn't Danny. Danny always forgot his chores, too busy off somewhere playing music or cruising, doing things I planned to do three years from now, when I got my driver's license. He looked like himself and he acted like an old man.

I hooked the screen and closed the curtains and changed into my

PJ's and crawled into bed. For the first time in two years, I was going to sleep without nightmares. Danny was just some dead guy who weeded and watered. He told me he wouldn't eat me, and he wouldn't lie about a thing like that.

I closed my eyes. I was just falling into the whirly part of sleep where all the edges of everything you think about stretch or shrink when I sat straight up, the fear I was so used to shocking through me. He hadn't told me what he was. Sure, he had told me he wouldn't eat me, but then, he wasn't really Danny, not the way he was acting, so how could I trust him?

I went to the window and looked out. He was loading all the weeds in a wheelbarrow. He wheeled the wheelbarrow around behind the house and dumped the weeds on a pile under a tarp. It was all very un-Danny.

I went back to bed and thought about it. It came to me presently that maybe he wasn't dead, or a ghoul, or a zombie, or anything like that. Maybe he'd turned into the scariest monster of all. A grownup.

I lay in bed awake the whole night. If it could happen to Danny, it could happen to anybody.

The next night, I watched him again. He was using a lawnmower, the kind without a motor that makes a sound like a strong sprinkler but not as wet. My dad had one of those a long time ago and he cussed it harder than he ever cussed the car. It stopped at every clump of grass and dulled its blades on every pebble. He wrestled with it. Finally he put it out with the trash and mumbled about doctors with weird fitness prescriptions.

Danny mowed. Up, down, up, down. Every once in a while something slowed the mower; then he'd lean into the handle and push the mower over whatever was in the way. Not a single curse. He'd turned into a grownup, and not even an interesting grownup.

I got out the letter I'd started writing to Garrett that afternoon. "How come you didn't tell me Danny wasn't dead? It took me a year to figure it out. And if he is dead, he's the boringest dead person I ever saw."

I chewed on my pencil and glanced out the window. Danny lifted the lawnmower in one fist and strolled toward the house with it swaying back and forth like a cloth pendulum, then glanced up at my window and dropped it. It thudded and I ducked. I reached for the light to switch it off, but it was too far away, and I knew he had seen me anyway. I huddled on the floor, feeling the fear pump-

ing through me, wondering why I was scared. I just saw a guy drop a lawnmower, that was all. After a minute the shakes stopped, and I crept toward the lamp. It was sitting up on my desk. I lay on the floor, reached in under my desk, and yanked the plug out of the wall socket.

"Clark," whispered a voice from the direction of the window.

I froze.

"Clark?" A little louder now.

I thought about Garrett telling me dead people wouldn't hurt me. I wondered what kind of dead people they had in Florida. Old dead people, maybe, and drug smugglers. Voodoo dead people. Maybe Garrett had changed his mind by now.

"I just don't want you to worry," said Danny's voice.

I sat up and scooted in under my desk. "Worry about what," I muttered, my voice rough around the edges.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

"You're not the real Danny. How do I know you're not lying?"

"What?"

He sounded so much like Danny—confused, a little irritated—that I peeked up over the top of my desk. His head was just outside my screen, and it was dark in my room; he was a silhouette, backlit by the street light. There were two red spots where his eyes should be. I screamed, not high like a girl, but just a sort of half-swallowed "Aaaaah!," then clapped my hand over my mouth.

"What?" he said. He blinked. I could tell because the red spots winked out and came back.

"Your eyes!"

"Huh?" He turned, looking toward the street, and I saw his nose outlined in yellow, and a sliver of his cheek; the light shone through his fake beard and glinted off his glasses. "Clark? Are you all right?"

"Danny," I said, hoping my saying his name would turn him into the normal boring person he had seemed like last night and earlier tonight. My mouth was dry. "Your eyes glow red in the dark."

"Damn," he said. Like he'd just gotten a popcorn hull stuck in his teeth or something.

"What are you doing up in my tree?"

"I saw you disappear and I thought maybe you fell down. I thought I'd better check. Then the light went out."

"You dropped the lawnmower. After carrying it like it weighed nothing."

"Damn. You did see that."

"Danny," I said, and it came out a muffled wail, "what are you?"

"Aw, Clark."

"You gonna suck my blood?"

"Nope."

"Are you still you at all?"

"Mostly," he said. "Just dead."

"How come you—how come you act like a little old man?"

"Is that what's bothering you?" He paused. "Clark, you'll find this out pretty soon. You've got to pretend to be a grownup, or people ask too many questions, especially if you're running around in a big body."

"You never acted like a grownup when you were alive. It's only since you died."

"Because now more than ever it's important for me not to make people ask questions. I have to try to look normal."

"Doing the yardwork at night isn't normal."

"It's more important that the yard looks nice than that I don't do it at night. I own the building. I have to keep the neighborhood people happy; if they think I'm a bad neighbor, they'll start talking. And after they talk for a while, they might do something."

"Like find out you're a vampire?" It was my last shot. I'd been saving that one, maybe because it fitted the facts best and I didn't want it to be the truth. Of all the monsters there were, vampires scared me the most, because they had their own minds, and they still hurt people.

"I don't know if they'd find that out," said Danny, not saying if he was a vampire or not, "but they might do something legal to me, like take away my property, and I depend on having that house and the income it generates. Damn, I do sound like a grownup." He was quiet for a long minute. "Maybe I am a grownup."

"You can't be a grownup," I said. I looked at the red spots floating in his head's shadow and tried to imagine his face around them. "You can't. You died before you had to be a grownup."

"Yeah," he said after a moment, "and it didn't work."

"You can't be a grownup and sleep in a coffin."

"Unless you're dead."

"Grownups don't go around sucking people's blood."

"They do it all the time. They call it something else."

"Grownups don't have eyes that glow red in the dark."

"You got me on that one."

I crawled up and sat on my desk, right near the window. I put my hand on the screen, and Danny touched it through the mesh. His fingers felt cool. After a minute I took my hand down and he put his down. "Honest you're not going to hurt me?" I said.

"Honest."

"I've been having bad dreams about you."

"I'm sorry. Listen, you're safe as long as you don't invite me in."

I had forgotten about that vampire rule. "Can you turn into a bat?" I asked.

"Uh-huh. Not very well yet."

"No grownup could do that."

He was quiet for a while. He looked toward the street again. The yellow light touched the surface of his eye and covered the red glow. "Clark," he said, "growing up isn't something you can stop from happening. Not very easily, anyway. I did my best and it didn't work. You don't have to worry about it for a while. But when you do, it won't really hurt that much."

"That's what I'm afraid of," I whispered. "Waking up one day and it'll be too late. I won't have felt it happening." The nightmares were really to keep me from sleeping my way into being a grownup.

"What's wrong with being a grownup?"

Words came out of me, thoughts I hadn't noticed having. "There's no magic. All of a sudden everything happens because of something you can explain, and you don't have to be afraid of anything, and—" I thought about Garrett walking calmly through a cemetery on Halloween night. That was what was wrong. All of a sudden, Garrett was a grownup, and I wasn't. He lost his nightmares.

I found mine.

"—and you don't see anything any more." I thought about Dad, telling me everything was all right downstairs without even checking. "'Cause you're not even looking. And nothing's important, and nothing's happening right now. I been watching Mom and Dad and people on TV, and they talk like it's all yesterday or tomorrow, how are we going to pay for this, when are we going on vacation, how could you spend that much on clothes? I'm going to turn into fourteen this year. I have this nightmare where I fall asleep the night before my birthday, and when I wake up the next morning, bam! Instant grownup."

Being a grownup was like being dead. Skeleton hands, reaching up to smother. Drag everybody else under the ground to die and be a grownup, too.

"I had that nightmare, too," Danny said. "It didn't happen like that."

"But it did happen, didn't it? How?"

"Oh, Clark," he said, and sighed.

"It happens when you start thinking your parents are right about everything and you worry about paying taxes and balancing the checkbook and stuff like that, right?"

"That's part of it."

"If I never, never do that, maybe it won't happen."

"I don't think that'll work. But I think—I have to think about this. There might be something . . ."

Mom knocked on my door. "Clark?" she called. "Who are you talking to? Are you listening to the radio? Why are you still awake? Go to sleep!"

I looked out the window. Danny had disappeared.

"Okay, Mom," I said. I climbed into bed and lay under the sheet, thinking about Danny. All day maybe he lay in a coffin in the basement next door. In the movies they always got all the stuff together, garlic, crosses, stake and a hammer to pound it with, and hunted out the coffins and killed the vampires like they were cockroaches. What if Danny's tenants figured out what he was? How could they not know? What if they got into his apartment and staked him out?

But they were grownups. They wouldn't wonder about it. They wouldn't believe it. I turned over and went to sleep.

The next night I went over to Garrett's house before bedtime, around nine fifteen, when the sun had been down for a few minutes, and sat on the basement steps. Danny, in disguise, came out a couple of minutes later. He jumped when he saw me.

"Look," I said, "I believe in you."

"I know that about you, Clark. Can we talk later? I have to go visit a couple of friends."

"No, I mean, I believe in you, and no grownup would believe in vampires if they weren't one, would they?"

"So?"

"So as long as I believe in you, I won't be a grownup."

He gave me a grin that showed all his teeth. They looked like normal teeth. "That's great," he said, and I almost lost it. How could he be a vampire and have normal teeth? Except for the chip on the front one; he'd had that for years. When I first asked him about it, I was six. He said he got it in a bicycle accident when he



was too young to ride motorcycles. So, maybe he wasn't a vampire, and that blew my protection against being a grownup out of the water. "I have to go, Clark," he said, and saved me again.

He turned into mist and blew away, even though there was no wind.

"Clark, it's almost bedtime," yelled my mom from the back door. "Come home and brush your teeth!"

I walked across Danny's carefully tended yard and hugged my secret. I started a new letter in my head. "Dear Garrett," it said, "greetings from my nightmare."

As long as my house is haunted, I don't think any grownup will move in.

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### **SOLUTION TO THE MARCH "UNSOLVED":**

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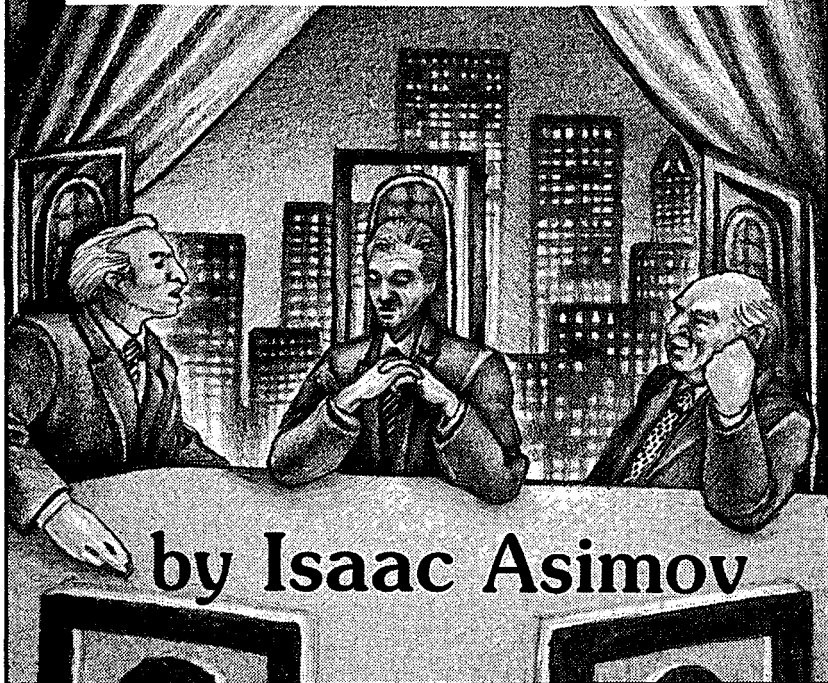
1. The receipt was fraudulent.

2. The second line: "*making total amount paid to date \$2,500.00*"; and the comma after \$3,000.00; and the word "*leaving*" in the third line; and the entire fourth line—all had been added, *later*, to the original receipt. This is proved by the fact that the "vertical alignment" of this portion of the writing does not agree with the rest of the receipt.

That is, the paper was put back into the machine later, and the type did not strike directly under the letters already on the page. This can be most easily observed from the three dots which come in a vertical line: the decimal point in \$3,000.00 and the dots above and below it. The dots in the first and third lines (the authentic lines) are in a straight line, but the dot in the third line which should be directly beneath them is just a little too far to the left. The difference in the placing of the "o's" in the words "of" and "amount" in the first and second lines is also very noticeable. Also, the comma after \$3,000.00 is not directly under the dot in the first line, as it should be. Note the difference in the spaces between the final "o" and this comma, and those between the other figures and the commas following them.

FICTION

# Northwestward



by Isaac Asimov

Illustration by Todd Hamilton

**T**homas Trumbull said to Emmanuel Rubin in a low voice, "Where the devil have you been? I've been trying to reach you for a week."

Rubin's eyes flashed behind the thick lenses of his specta-

cles, and his sparse beard bristled. "I was away at the Berkshires for a week. I was *not* aware I had to apply for permission to you for that."

"I wanted to speak to you."

"Then speak to me now. Here

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I am. That is, supposing you can think of something intelligent to say."

Trumbull looked about hastily. The Black Widowers had gathered for the monthly banquet at the Milano, and Trumbull had managed to arrive on time because he was the host.

He said, "Keep your voice down, for God's sake, Manny. I can't speak freely now. It's about," his voice dropped to a mere mouthing, "my guest."

"Well, what about him?" Rubin glanced in the direction of the tall, distinguished-looking elderly man who was conversing with Geoffrey Avalon in the far corner. The guest was a good two inches taller than Avalon, who was usually the tallest person at the gathering. Rubin, who was ten inches shorter than Avalon, grinned.

"I think it does Jeff good to have to look up now and then," he said.

"Listen to me, will you?" said Trumbull. "I've talked to the others, and you were the only one I was really worried about and the only one I couldn't reach."

"But what are you worried about? Get to the point."

"It's my guest. He's peculiar."

"If he's your guest—"

"Sh! He's an interesting guy, and he's not nuts, but you may consider him peculiar and I

don't want you to mock him. You just let him be peculiar and accept it."

"How is he peculiar?"

"He has an *idée fixe*, if you know what that means."

Rubin looked revolted. "Can you tell me why it's so necessary for an American with a stumbling knowledge of English to say '*idée fixe*' when the English phrase 'fixed idea' does just as well?"

"He has a fixed idea, then. It will come out because he can't keep it in. Please don't make fun of it, or of him. *Please* accept him on his own terms."

"This violates the whole principle of the grilling, Tom."

"It just bends it a little. I'm asking you to be polite, that's all. Everyone else has agreed."

Rubin's eyes narrowed. "I'll try, but so help me, Tom, if this is some sort of gag—if I'm being set up for something—I'll stand on a stool if I have to, and I'll punch you right in the eye."

"There's no gag involved."

Rubin wandered over to where Mario Gonzalo was putting the finishing touches on his caricature of the guest. Not much of a caricature at that. He was turning out a Gibson man, a collar ad.

Rubin looked at it, then turned to look at the guest. He said, "You're leaving out the lines, Mario."

"Caricature," said Gonzalo, "is the art of truthful exaggeration, Manny. When a guy looks that good at his age, you don't spoil the effect by sticking in lines."

"What's his name?"

"I don't know. Tom didn't give it. He says we ought to wait for the grilling to ask."

Roger Halsted ambled over, drink in hand, and said in a low voice, "Tom was looking for you all week, Manny."

"He told me. And he found me right here."

"Did he explain what he wanted?"

"He didn't *explain* it. He just asked me to be nice."

"Are you going to?"

"I will, until I get the idea that this is a joke at my expense. After which—"

"No, he's serious."

Henry, that quiet bit of waiter-perfection, said in his soft, carrying voice, "Gentlemen, dinner is served."

And they all sat down to their crableg cocktails.

James Drake had stubbed out his cigarette since, by general vote, there was to be no smoking during the actual meal, and handed the ashtray to Henry.

He said, "Henry's announcement just now interrupted our guest in some comments he was

making about Superman, which I'd like him to repeat, if he doesn't mind."

The guest nodded his head in a stately gesture of gratitude and, having finished an appreciative mouthful of veal marenngo, said, "What I was saying was that Superman was a travesty of an ancient and honorable tradition. There has always been a branch of literature concerning itself with heroes; human beings of superior strength and courage. Heroes, however, should be supernormal but not supernatural."

"As a matter of fact," said Avalon, in his startling baritone, "I agree. There have always been characters like Hercules, Achilles, Gilgamesh, Rustum—"

"We get the idea, Jeff," said Rubin, balefully.

Avalon went on, smoothly, "Even half a century ago, we had the development of Conan by Robert Howard, as a modern legend. These were all far stronger than we puny fellows are, but they were not godlike. They could be hurt, wounded, even killed. They usually were, in the end."

"In the *Iliad*," said Rubin, perfectly willing, as always, to start an argument, "the gods could be wounded. Ares and Aphrodite were each wounded by Diomedes."

"Homer can be allowed liberties," put in the guest. "But compare, say, Hercules with Superman. Superman has X-ray eyes, he can fly through space without protection, he can move faster than light. None of this would be true of Hercules. But with Superman's abilities, where is the excitement, where's the suspense? Then, too, where's the fairness? He fights off human crooks who are less to him than a ladybug would be to me. How much pride can I take in flipping a ladybug off my wrist?"

Drake said, "One trouble with these heroes, though, is that they're musclebound at the temples. Take Siegfried. If he had an atom of intelligence, he took care never to show it. For that matter, Hercules was not remarkable for the ability to think, either."

"On the other hand," said Halsted, "Prince Valiant had brains, and so, especially, did Odysseus."

"Rare exceptions," said Drake.

Rubin turned to the guest and said, "You seem very interested in storybook heroes."

"Yes, I am," said the guest, quietly. "It's almost an *idée fixe* with me." He smiled with obvious self-deprecation. "I keep talking about them all the time, it seems."

It was soon after that that

Henry brought on the baked Alaska.

Trumbull tapped his water glass with his spoon at about the time that Henry was carefully supplying the brandy. Trumbull had waited well past the coffee, as though reluctant to start the grilling, and even now the tinkle of metal against glass seemed less authoritative than customary.

Trumbull said, "It is time we begin the grilling of our guest, and I would like to suggest that Manny Rubin do the honors."

Rubin favored Trumbull with a hard stare, then said to the guest, "Sir, it is usual to ask our guest to begin by justifying his existence, but against all custom, Tom has not introduced you by name. May I, therefore, ask you what your name is?"

"Certainly," said the guest. "My name is Bruce Wayne."

Rubin turned immediately toward Trumbull, who made an unobtrusive, but clear, quieting gesture with his hands.

Rubin took a deep breath and managed a smile. "Well, Mr. Wayne, since we were speaking of heroes, I can't resist asking you if you are ever kidded about being the comic-strip hero, Batman. Bruce Wayne is Batman's real name, as you probably know."

"I do know," said Wayne, "because I *am* Batman."

There was a general stir at the table at this, and even the ordinarily imperturbable Henry raised his eyebrows. Wayne was apparently accustomed to this reaction, for he sipped at his brandy without reacting.

Rubin cast another quick glance at Trumbull, then said carefully, "I suppose that, in saying this, you imply that you are, in one way or another, to be identified with the comic-strip character, and not with something else named Batman, as, for instance, an officer's orderly in the British army."

"You're right," said Wayne. "I'm referring to the comic-strip character. Of course," and he smiled gently, "I'm not trying to convince you I am literally the comic-strip Batman, cape, bat symbol, and all. As you see, I am a three-dimensional living human being, and I assure you I am aware of that. However, I *inspired* the existence of the comic-strip character Batman."

"And how did that come about?" asked Rubin.

"In the past, when I was considerably younger than I am now—"

"How old are you now?" asked Halsted, suddenly.

Wayne smiled. "Tom has told me I must answer all questions truthfully, so I will tell you,

though I'd prefer not to. I am seventy-three years old."

Halsted said, "You don't look it, Mr. Wayne. You could pass for fifty."

"Thank you. I try to keep fit."

Rubin said, with a trace of impatience, "Would you get back to my question, Mr. Wayne? Do you want it repeated?"

"No, my memory manages to limp along satisfactorily. When I was considerably younger than I am now, I was of some help to various law enforcement agencies. At that time, there was money to be had in these comic strips about heroes, and a friend of mine suggested that I serve as a model for one. Batman was invented with a great many of my characteristics and much of my history.

"It was, of course, distinctly romanticized. I do not go about with a cape and never have done so, or had a helicopter of my own, but I did insist that Batman be given no supernatural powers but be restricted to entirely human abilities. I admit they do stretch it a bit sometimes. Even the villains Batman faces, although they are invariably grotesque, are exaggerations of people with whom I had problems in the past and whom I helped put out of circulation."

Avalon said, "I see why Superman annoys you, then.



There was a television Batman for two seasons. What about that?"

"I remember it well. Especially Julie Newmar playing Catwoman. I would have liked to have met her as an opponent in real life. The program was played for laughs, you know, and good-natured fun."

"Well," said Drake, looking about the table and carefully lighting a cigarette now that the meal was over (and cupping it in his hand in the obvious belief that that would trap the smoke), "you seem to have had an amusing life. Are you the multimillionaire that the comic-strip Batman is?"

"As a matter of fact," said Wayne, "I'm very well off. My house in the suburbs is elaborate, and I even have an adjoining museum, but you know, we're all human. I have my problems."

"Married? Children?" asked Avalon.

"No, there I also resemble my alter ego—or he resembles me. I have never been married and have no children. Those are not my problems. I have a butler who tends to my household needs, along with some other servants who are of comparatively trivial importance."

"In the comic strip," said Gonzalo, "your butler is your friend and confidant. Right?"

"Well—yes." And he sighed.

Rubin looked thoughtful, and said, "Tell us about the museum, Mr. Wayne. What kind of museum is it? A headquarters for science and criminology?"

"Oh, no. The comic strip continues successfully, but my own day as an active upholder of the law is over. My museum consists of curios. There have been a great many objects made that have been based on the Batman cartoon and his paraphernalia. I have, I believe, at least one of every single piece ever made in that fashion, Batman notepaper, large-scale models of the Batmobile, figurines of every important character in the strip, copies of every magazine issue featuring the character, cassettes of all the television shows, and so on.

"It pleases me to have all this. After all, I am sure the strip will survive me, and it will be the part of me that will be best remembered after my death. I don't have children to revere my memory and I have done nothing very much in my real life to make me part of history. These evidences of my fictional life are the best I can do to bring myself a little nearer to immortality."

Rubin said, "I see. Now I'm going to ask a question that may cause you to feel a little



uncomfortable, but you must answer. You said— Oh, for God's sake, Tom, this is a legitimate question. Why don't you let me ask it before you start jumping."

Trumbull, looking both abashed and troubled, sank back in his chair.

Rubin said, "A little while ago, Mr. Wayne, you said that you too have your problems and, almost immediately afterward, when you mentioned your butler, you looked distinctly uncomfortable. Are you having trouble with your butler?—What are you laughing at, Tom?"

"Nothing," said Trumbull, chuckling.

Wayne said, "He's laughing because he bet me five dollars that if I just answered any questions about me, and did so naturally and truthfully, the Black Widowers would have this out of me within twenty minutes, and he's won."

"I take it, then, that Tom Trumbull knows about this."

"Yes, I do," said Trumbull, "but I'm dealing myself out of this one for that reason. The rest of you handle it."

"I would suggest," interposed Avalon, "that Tom and Manny both quiet down and that we ask Mr. Wayne to tell us his troubles with his butler."

"My butler's name," began

Wayne, "is Cecil Pennyworth—" "Don't you mean Alfred Pennyworth?" put in Halsted.

"No interruptions," said Trumbull, clinking his water glass.

Wayne said, "That's all right, Tom. I don't mind being interrupted. Alfred Pennyworth was indeed my butler originally, and with his permission, his name was used in the strip. However, he was older than I, and in the course of time, he died. Characters do not necessarily age and die in comic strips, but real life is rather different, you know. My present butler is Alfred's nephew."

"Is he a worthy substitute?" asked Drake softly.

"No one could ever replace Alfred, of course, but Cecil has given satisfaction—" here Wayne frowned—"in all but one respect, and there my problem rests."

"You must understand that I sometimes attend conventions that are devoted to comic-strip heroes. I don't make a big issue of my being Batman, and I don't put on a cape or anything like that, although the publishers sometimes hire actors to do so."

"What I do is set up an exhibition of my Batman memorabilia. Sometimes my publishers set up the more conventional items for sale, not so much for the money that is taken in as

for the publicity, since it keeps the thought of Batman alive in the minds of people. I have nothing to do with the commercial aspect. What I do is exhibit a selection of some of the more unusual curios that are *not* for sale. I allow them to be seen and studied, while I give a little lecture on the subject. That has its publicity value, too.

"Needless to say, it is necessary to keep a sharp eye on all the exhibits. Most of them have no intrinsic value to speak of, but they are enormously valuable to me and sometimes, I'm afraid, to the fans. While the vast majority of them wouldn't think of appropriating any of the items, there are bound to be occasional individuals who, out of a natural dishonesty or, more likely, an irresistible desire, would try to make off with one or more items. We have to watch for that.

"I am even the target for more desperate felons. On two different occasions there have been attempts to break into my museum; attempts that, I am glad to say, were foiled by our rather sophisticated security system. I see you are smiling, Mr. Avalon, but actually my memorabilia, however trivial they might seem, could be disposed of quietly for a considerable sum of money.

"One item I have *does*, in fact,

have a sizable intrinsic value. It is a Batman ring in which the bat symbol is cut out of an emerald. I was given it under circumstances that, if I may say so, reflected well on the real Batman—myself—and it has always been much dearer to me for that reason than because of the value of the emerald itself. It is the *pièce de résistance* of my collection and I put it on display only very occasionally.

"A year or so ago, though, I had promised to appear at a convention in Minneapolis; and I did not quite feel up to going. As you see, I am getting on in age, and for all my fitness program, my health and my sense of well-being are not what they once were.

"I therefore asked Cecil Pennyworth to attend the convention as my substitute. On occasion I have asked him to fill in for me, though, till then, not at a major convention. I had promised an interesting display, but I had to cut that to Cecil's measure. I chose small items that could all be packed systematically—so they could be quickly checked to make sure the display was intact—in a single good-sized suitcase. I sent Cecil off with the usual unnecessary admonition to keep a close watch on everything.

"He called me from Minneapolis to assure me of his safe

arrival and, again, a few hours later, to apprise me of the fact that an attempt had been made to switch suitcases.

"‘And failed, I hope,’ I said.

"He assured me that he had the right suitcase and that the display was safe and intact, but he asked me if I really felt he should display the ring. You see, since I was sending only small items, I felt that I was, in a way, cheating my public, and I therefore included my ring so that at least they could see this rarest and most valuable of all my curios. I told Cecil, therefore, that he should certainly display the ring, but keep the sharpest of eyes upon it.

"I heard from him again two mornings later, when the convention was drawing to a close. He was breathless and sounded strained.

"‘Everything is safe, Mr. Wayne,’ he said, ‘but I think I am being followed. I can duck them, though. I’m going northwest, and I’ll see you soon.’

"I said, rather alarmed, ‘Are you in danger?’

"He only said, ‘I must go now,’ and hung up.

"I was galvanized into activity—it’s the Batman in me, I suppose. I threw off all trace of my indisposition and made ready for action. It seemed to me that I knew what was happening. Cecil was being tracked

by someone intent on that suitcase, and he was not himself a strong person of the heroic mold. It seemed to him, therefore, that he ought to do the unexpected. Instead of returning to New York, he would try to elude those who were after him, and quietly head off in another direction altogether. Once he had gotten away from his pursuers, he could then return to New York in safety.

"What’s more, I knew where he was going. I have several homes over the United States, which is the privilege of one who, like myself, is quite well off. One of my homes is a small and unobtrusive place in North Dakota, where I sometimes go when I feel the need to isolate myself from the too-unbearable insinuations of the world into my private life.

"It made good sense to go there. No one but Cecil and me and some legal representatives knows that the house in question belongs to me. If he got there safely, he could feel secure. He knew that to indicate to me that he was going northwestward would have complete meaning to me, and would mean nothing to anyone who might overhear him. That was clever. He had to hang up quickly because, I presume, he was aware of enemies in the vicinity. He had said, ‘I’ll see you soon,’ by

which, it seemed to me, he was begging me to go to my North Dakota home to join him. Clearly, he wanted me to take over the responsibility of defense. As I said, he was not the heroic type.

"He had called me in the morning, and before night fell, I was at my North Dakota house. I remember being grateful that it was early fall. I would have hated to have to go there with two feet of snow on the ground and the temperature forty below."

Rubin, who was listening intently, said, "I suppose that your butler, in weather like that, would have chosen some other place as a hideout. He would have told you he was going southeastward and you would have gone to your home in Florida, if you have one."

"I have a home in Georgia," said Wayne, "but you are correct otherwise. I suppose that is what he would have done. In any case, when I arrived in North Dakota, I found that Cecil was not yet there. I got in touch with the people who care for the place in my absence (and who know me only as a 'Mr. Smith'), and they assured me that nobody, to their knowledge, had arrived. There were no signs of any very recent occupancy, so he could not have arrived and been waylaid in the

house. Of course, he might have been interrupted en route.

"I spent the night in the house, a very wakeful night as you can imagine, and an uncomfortable one. In the morning, when he still had not arrived, I called the police. There were no reports of any accidents to planes, trains, buses, or cars that could have possibly applied to Cecil.

"I decided to wait another day or so. It was possible, after all, that he might have taken a circuitous route or paused on the way, 'holed up,' one might say, to mislead his pursuers, and would soon take up the trip again. In short, he might arrive a day late, or even two days late.

"On the third morning, however, I could wait no more. I was certain, by then, that something was very wrong. I called my New York home, feeling he might have left a message there, and was rather berating myself for not having made the call earlier for that purpose; or, if no message had been received, to have left the number at which I could be reached when the message came.

"At any rate, on the third morning I called, and it was Cecil who answered. I was thunderstruck. He had arrived on the afternoon of the day I had left. I simply said I would

be home that night and, of course, I was. So you see my difficulty, gentlemen."

There was a short silence at the rather abrupt ending to the story, and then Rubin said, "I take it that Cecil was perfectly safe and sound."

"Oh, yes, indeed. I asked him about the pursuers, and he smiled faintly and said, 'I believe I eluded them, Mr. Wayne. Or I may even have been entirely mistaken and they did not really exist. At least, I wasn't bothered at all on my way home.'"

"So that he got home safely?"

"Yes, Mr. Rubin."

"And the exhibition curios were intact?"

"Entirely."

"Even the ring, Mr. Wayne?"

"Absolutely."

Rubin threw himself back in the chair with an annoyed expression on his face, "Then, no, I don't see your difficulty."

"But why did he tell me he was going northwestward? He told me that distinctly. There is no question of my having misheard."

Halsted said, "Well, he thought he was being followed, so he told you he was going to the North Dakota place. Then he decided that either he had gotten away from the pursuers, or that they didn't exist, and he thereupon switched his plans,

and went straight to New York without having time to call you again and warn you of that."

"Don't you think, in that case," said Wayne, with some heat, "he might have apologized to me? After all, he had misled me, sent me on an unnecessary chase into North Dakota, subjected me to a little over two days of uncertainty during which I not only feared for my collection, but also felt that he might be lying dead or badly injured somewhere. All this was the result of his having told me, falsely, that he was heading northwestward. And then, having arrived in New York, he might have known, since I wasn't home, that I had flown to the North Dakota house to be with him, and he might have had the kindness to call me there and tell me he was safe. He knew the North Dakota number. But he didn't call me, and he didn't apologize to me or excuse himself when I got home."

"Are you sure he knew that you were in North Dakota?" asked Halsted.

"Of course I'm sure he knew. For one thing, I told him. I had to account for the fact that I had been away from home for three days. I said, 'Sorry I wasn't home when you arrived, Cecil. I had to make a quick and unexpected trip to North Dakota.'

It would have taken a heart of forged steel not to have winced at that, and not to have begun apologizing, but it didn't seem to bother him at all."

There was another pause at this point, and then Avalon cleared his throat in a deep rumble and said, "Mr. Wayne, you know your butler better than any of us do. How do you account for this behavior?"

"The logical feeling is that it was just callousness," said Wayne, "but I don't know him as a callous man. I have evolved the following thought, though: What if he had been tempted by the ring and the other curios himself? What if it was his plan to dispose of them for his own benefit? He could tell me that he was being pursued, and that would send me off on my foolish mission to North Dakota so that he would have a period of time to put away his ill-gotten gains somewhere and pretend he had been robbed. See?"

Rubin said, "Do you know Cecil to be a dishonest man?"

"I wouldn't have said so, but anyone can yield to temptation."

"Granted. But if he did, he resisted. You have everything. He didn't steal anything."

"That's true, but his telling me he was going northwest and then never explaining why he had changed his

mind tells me that he was up to skulduggery. Just because he was too fainthearted to go through with it this time doesn't excuse him. He might be bolder the next time."

Rubin said, "Have you asked him to explain the northwestern business?"

Wayne hesitated. "I don't like to. Suppose there is some explanation. The fact that I would ask him about it would indicate that I didn't trust him, and that would spoil our relationship. My having waited so long makes it worse. If I ask now, it would mean I have brooded about it all year, and I'm sure he would resign in resentment. On the other hand, I can't think what explanation he might have, and my not asking him leaves me unable to relax in his presence. I find I am always keyed up and waiting for him to try again."

Rubin said, "Then it seems that if you don't ask him, but convince yourself he's guilty, your relationship is ruined. And if you do ask him and he convinces you he's innocent, your relationship is ruined. What if you don't ask him, but convince yourself he is innocent?"

"That would be fine," said Wayne, "but how? I would love to do so. When I think of my long and close association with Alfred Pennyworth, Cecil's uncle, I feel I owe something to the

nephew—but I must have an explanation and I don't dare to ask for it."

Drake said, "Since Tom Trumbull knows about all this—What do you say about it, Tom?"

Wayne interposed. "Tom says I should forget all about it."

Trumbull said, "That's right. Cecil might have been so ashamed of his needless panic that he just can't talk about it."

"But he *did* talk about it," said Wayne, heatedly. "He casually admitted that he might have been mistaken about being pursued, and did so as soon as I got home. Why didn't he apologize to me and express regret for the trouble he had put me to?"

"Maybe *that's* what he can't talk about," said Trumbull.

"Ridiculous. What do I do? Wait for a deathbed confession? He's twenty-two years younger than I am, and he'll outlive me."

"Then," said Avalon, "if we're to clear the air between you, we must find some natural explanation that would account for his having told you he was heading northwestward and that would also account for his having failed to express regret over the trouble he put you to."

"Exactly," said Wayne, "but to explain both at once is impossible. I defy you to."

The silence that followed en-

dured for quite a while until Rubin said, "And you won't accept embarrassment as an explanation for his failure to express regret?"

"Of course not."

"And you won't ask him?"

"No, I won't," said Wayne, biting off the remark with decision.

"And you find having him in your employ under present conditions is wearisome and nerve-racking."

"Yes, I do."

"But you don't want to fire him, either."

"No. For old Alfred's sake, I don't."

"In that case," said Rubin, gloomily, "you have painted yourself into a corner, Mr. Wayne. I don't see how you can get out of it."

"I still say," growled Trumbull, "that you ought to forget about it, Bruce. Pretend it never happened."

"That's more than I can do," said Wayne, frowning.

"Then Manny is right," said Trumbull. "You can't get out of the hole you're in."

Rubin looked about the table. "Tom and I say Wayne can't get out of this impasse. What about the rest of you?"

Avalon said, "What if a third party—"

"No," said Wayne instantly. "I won't have anyone else dis-



cussing this with Cecil. This is strictly between him and me."

Avalon shook his head. "Then I'm stuck, too."

"It would appear," said Rubin, looking about the table, "that none of the Black Widowers can help you."

"None of the Black Widowers seated at the table," said Gonzalo, "but we haven't asked Henry yet. He's our waiter, Mr. Wayne, and you'd be surprised at his ability to work things out. —Henry!"

"Yes, Mr. Gonzalo," said Henry, from his quiet post at the sideboard.

"You heard everything. What do you think Mr. Wayne ought to do?"

"I agree with Mr. Trumbull, sir. I think that Mr. Wayne should forget the matter."

Wayne rolled his eyes upward and shook his head firmly.

"However," Henry went on, "I have a specific reason for suggesting it, one that perhaps Mr. Wayne will agree with."

"Good," said Gonzalo. "What is it, Henry?"

"I couldn't help but notice, sir, that all of you, in referring to what Mr. Pennyworth said on the phone, mentioned that he said he was going northwestward. That, however, isn't quite so. When Mr. Wayne first mentioned the phone conversation, he quoted Mr. Penny-

worth as saying, 'I'm going northwest.' Is that correct?"

Wayne said, "Yes, as a matter of fact, that is what he said, but does it matter? What is the difference between 'northwestward' and 'northwest'?"

"A huge difference, Mr. Wayne. To go 'northwestward' can only mean traveling in a particular direction, but to go 'northwest' need not mean that at all."

"Of course it needs to mean that."

"No, sir. I beg your pardon, Mr. Wayne, but 'to go northwest' could mean one's intention to take a plane belonging to Northwest Airlines, one of our larger plane lines."

The pause that followed was electric. Then Wayne whispered, "Good Lord!"

"Yes, sir. And in that case, everything explains itself. Mr. Pennyworth may have been mistaken about being followed, but, even if he thought he was, he was not sufficiently worried over the situation to follow any circuitous route. He told you he was taking a Northwest airplane, speaking of the matter elliptically, as many people do, and assuming you would understand."

"Despite the name of the plane line, which may have been more accurate at its start, Northwest Airlines serves the United

States generally and you can take one of its planes from Minneapolis to New York, traveling eastward. I'm sure that but for the coincidence that you had a home in North Dakota, you might have interpreted Mr. Pennyworth's remark correctly.

"Mr. Pennyworth, under the impression he had told you he was flying to New York, said he would see you soon—meaning, in New York. And he hung up suddenly probably because his flight announced that it was ready for boarding."

"Good Lord!" said Wayne, again.

"Exactly, sir. Then when Mr. Pennyworth got home and found you had been to North Dakota, he could honestly see no connection between that and any-

thing he might have done, so that it never occurred to him to apologize for his actions. He couldn't have asked you why you had gone to North Dakota; as a servant, it wasn't his place to. Had you explained of your own accord, he would have understood the confusion and would undoubtedly have apologized for contributing to it. But you remained silent."

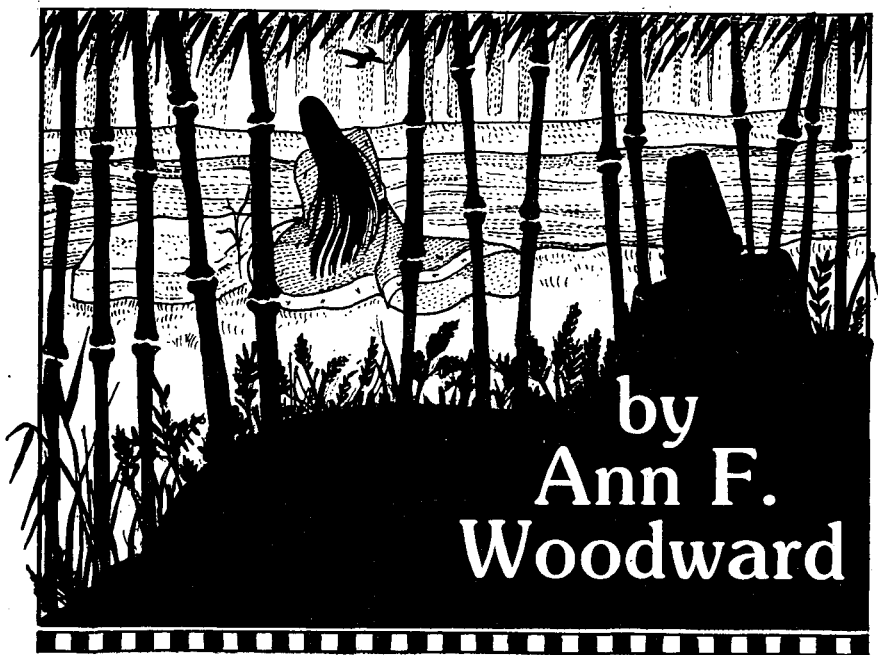
"Good Lord!" said Wayne, a third time. Then, energetically, "I have spent over a year making myself miserable over nothing at all. There's no question about it. Batman has made a terrible mistake."

"Batman," said Henry, "has, as you yourself have pointed out, the great advantage, and the occasional disadvantage, of being only human."

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FICTION

# The Wearing of Purple



by  
Ann F.  
Woodward

**I**t is the time when autumn takes its first grip, a day of still, dead cold. Low clouds close off the sun, and across the river from the temple the trees' mix of red and green is dimmed to bronze by hazy air. A woman

emerges alone from a path under the pines, her garments full and colorful, swinging out as she stops and turns to see if they have followed her. If this had been a high place, she would have thrown herself over.

But there is only a short drop of the bank to a stretch of gray stones and the broad, slow Uji River beyond.

She has run from them all—the mumbling priests who consent to pray for her but will not look at the curtains behind which she sits to speak to them, and who let her feel the contempt they have learned as a defense against women; and her attending ladies, who can only weep and console, leeching away whatever strength she may find in herself.

Behind her someone else has observed her flight. He takes the same path, hiding in shadows, angling through the trees.

It is not for comfort she has come here to the temple at Kohata. Her husband is ready to send her back to her family because she has given him no children, and this retreat is her last hope. She wants a miracle, she wants the bad spirit in her that fights her husband's seed to be unlocked, driven away or reformed, and she has come to this place where so many of her ancestors are buried to appeal for their help.

Here is a wide, flat stone, grass growing from a crack in the side, stars of white lichen on it. This seems a corner made for quiet thought, protected by a mass of bamboo growing close behind. She will not cry, she thinks. She must gather her-

self, concentrate on goodness.

She does not hear the man as he comes up behind her.

Her women have wandered back to the temple. A priest asks for their mistress. "She has left us," they say and point the way she went. He is alarmed.

When they find her she is bruised and bleeding and has to be carried. She leaves the temple in haste, claiming that she fell. And she is hopeless now, the evil in her has been affirmed by that man. She will never admit what happened to her. No one must know how bad she is.

The head priest leaves also, on his way to the capital to see his friend, the Great Minister of the Right. Three women have been attacked in the past month, and his temple's name is in danger.

**R**iding in a simple palm leaf carriage a week later, the Lady Aoi was returning in the late afternoon from an errand to the fan maker. The princess whom she served as lady-in-waiting and companion wanted a special fan as a gift for one of her other ladies who was marrying a provincial governor and moving with him to the Izu Peninsula. Aoi had chosen pearskin lacquer and cloud-design white paper, and the fan was to have painted on it a scene of the

Ashigara Barrier in disrepair. Beside the painting, the princess would write in her own hand a poem she had already mentioned to Aoi.

*Let barriers fall*

*When you turn to come to me.*

The sun shone and a brisk wind cut down from the mountains, shaking the woven panels of the carriage and making them slat against the frame, causing sudden chills on Aoi's arms, reminding her that, here at the beginning of the Tenth Month, it was time to expect more serious weather. But this thought did not disturb her. She felt cheerful, reckless, energetic. Going through the city's lively streets, she had arranged a crack in the rear blind so that she could see the crowds of townsmen, and she had let her left sleeve hang out over the tailgate, forsaking her usual modesty and displaying the reds of autumn set off by one edge of deep blue color in the layers of silk robes she wore one over the other. Soaring above the general noise, the call of a melon seller had seemed the perfect expression of this day, two tones of almost song, loud and just short of a bellow. She had been about to stop the carriage and send the runner to fetch him when she caught a shift of the melon man's eye. If his melons

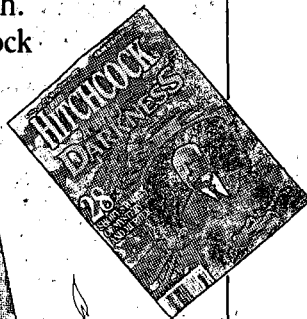
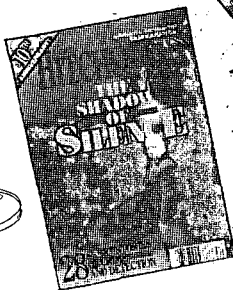
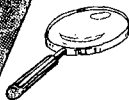
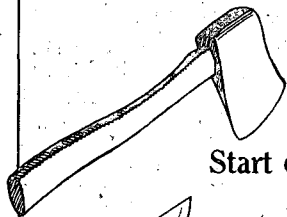
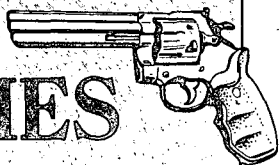
were really good, he would look eagerly toward such a carriage, hoping to sell them all to a large household. Aoi passed on to the wide gate of the princess's house, where she got down and walked across the courtyard. Cold silk blew against her legs, her hair lifted and fell on her neck, cool as water. Air. She moved in air, lightened, cleaned.

"The minister is here," O-hana said, as she took Aoi's short coat and smoothed her hair along its full length to the floor. Aoi only nodded as she left for the main hall.

Seated next to his daughter on a brocade cushion, the Great Minister of the Right had loosened his belts and removed his formal cap, apparently slightly mussing his hair as part of the rumpling process of getting comfortable. He looked as amiable and unimposing as he did when they visited him in his own mansion, where he wore old clothes and was likely to walk about the garden in wooden clogs when he consulted with his gardeners. He turned as she came in and there was stillness in his face at the sight of her.

Smiling, the princess spoke. "My father has been complaining that you are never at home. He has come here three times looking for you, he says." She tapped his arm with her folded fan. "And all the time, Father,

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HEGC-8

I thought you were lonely for me." The minister's wife had died when the princess was young, and he had raised his daughter with the help of a devoted nurse. The princess would be living even now in his mansion in the Second Ward, except that she found it easier to manage the difficult relations with her husband in this house of her own. She looked toward Aoi with tension in her face, which cleared instantly as she decided that this eldest of her ladies could never compete for her father's affection.

They sat with the other three of the princess's ladies. Aoi moved to join them, straightening the cushion that was pushed toward her and taking her place at a respectful distance. All this the minister watched without speaking but with an expression so intent that Aoi opened her fan and turned away behind it, looking back the next instant. To be sought is flattering. Pleasure mingled with regret that she had missed his previous visits and fondness welled in her.

"Alas, I am too dutiful," she said. "When my mistress sends me out I go, never thinking to stay at home waiting for gentlemen to call."

He laughed now, with a small noise in his throat. "Well, I..."

She had never known him to

be lacking in quick returns of wit, and she began to think that his errand must be serious.

Laughing again, still looking at her, he said, "How is it that sometimes only one person will do? You must excuse me, ladies, but you know her abilities. There is something I want to talk over with her."

Educated in Chinese literature, as a man would be, Aoi felt herself, in other company, an oddity and had always to be careful to conceal her unwomanly knowledge. Those who knew her well valued her skills in medicine and her good sense. The minister had several times found her helpful in difficult affairs.

"But there is time," he said. "We may take our time." And he turned to gossip, his voice livening. "Did you see the Major Counselor at the festival? He was so proud of his son's success in the archery contest that he could barely walk to his carriage for turning around to see who would congratulate him next. And after the banquet that night he absolutely could not walk anywhere. Usually he is quite sober but that night..."

"His son is Nobumitsu, the one who is so small?"

"Yes. He was ill as an infant, his father says. And we can certainly forgive him a little pride, now that Nobumitsu has grown



up to be a valuable member of the guard. It is a not very impressive position for one of his rank, but it satisfies for now and he can move on later." The minister laughed to himself. "He has many talents," shaking his head. But he did not explain.

Aoi was quiet through most of the tale-telling, still feeling clear and cool and as if she heard the others from a distance. Only the minister's intelligent face interested her, and she observed his least expression as something welcome and familiar. When he finally indicated that he was ready to speak privately with her, the sun had set and violet strands of cloud hung above the horizon. She led him to a back corner of the room they were in, but he stepped firmly on, passing through the western gallery and inquiring which was her verandah. There they settled.

He talked of twilight and darkening pines, of a lone plover he had seen on the moor the last time he hunted, of the press of business in high office, of never having time for just such musings as now. Aoi, more and more free and solidly herself, had not known anyone so pleasing to her since her husband of long ago, who had died young. She welcomed the warmth of his presence near her, the bulk

and softness of his sleeve next to hers, the low modulations of his voice. He made no poems, he did not stroke the hems of her gowns, he left her face concealed if her hair swung down. It was she who first moved into the gallery and lowered the blind, and then into the inner room where O-hana had laid out the bedpads behind curtains and then retired to her own room. She did not once say to him, "But you had something to ask me," or to herself, "I am a woman over thirty years old, this is no longer for me."

In the morning he was awake before light, rising reluctantly, with many returns to her as he tied up his trousers and felt about in the dark for his sashes. "I want you to come with me to Kohata," he said, just before leaving.

"Yes," she said, not knowing how he intended to manage secrecy, not awake to complications.

In mid-morning a carriage came, and a man with notes for both Aoi and the princess. O-hana had packed simple clothes suitable for a rural temple. She entered the carriage with Aoi, and they were driven away. The minister did not appear. Aoi had no idea what he had told his daughter, but it must have satisfied her because her manner when Aoi went to take her leave was perfectly normal.

Aoi's note said only

*By Uji's river*

*The plover hides in the mist.*

Yesterday's wind had brought back the clouds, which blanked the sky and evened out all color. Aoi sat far to the front of the carriage. In this way she had a longer view through the blind across the rear opening, which further hazed the scenery. Red maple leaves were soft masses of warmth, the crowds and racing carriages of the city avenues and later the wooded roads toward the temple she saw as dull moving friezes of journey, all detail lost. Her mind hung dreaming, its normal functions suspended. O-hana, quiet as usual, saw the glowing, half-smiling face, and she was watchful and guiding when they arrived.

The temple at Kohata was not large, but it had extensive grounds. It was famous as a burial place for the ruling family. In this area of the river, pine forest ran to the edge of the bank, which dropped a few feet to the level of the water. There was a long, narrow clearing for the temple buildings: a Hall of Worship, a new Hall of Concentration, a five-storied pagoda, and various residence halls and guest houses. Between the buildings, swept and raked white sand was shaped

by borders of carefully tended plantings of shrubs and ornamental trees.

Aoi was given a room at the end of a long guest house and very soon the minister appeared, making exclamations of surprise at finding here one of his acquaintances. For propriety, and because they were in a holy place, Aoi had had O-hana set up a curtain screen, and she received him properly, seeing through the cloth only a vague outline of his figure against the light from the door, which was left open. He seemed to approve these arrangements and greeted her in a decidedly audible voice.

"Well, here we are together. Could anything be more surprising," and in a quieter tone, "I have brought you a gift."

O-hana took a large lacquered straw box from the minister's attendant, neither of them remarking on the oddity of a gift ready-to-hand for a person met by chance. The top half of the box was lifted off and the opened bottom half pushed under the hanging curtain. Something lay wrapped in mounds of thin pale orange paper. Aoi wondered at her shaking fingers and breathlessness as she opened the crisp wrapping.

It was a short coat of purple silk, not the pure shade that only royalty was allowed to wear, but dark, just the color of

very ripe grapes, tinged with brown and deep red. The silk was perfectly plain, woven without any pattern, but there was embroidery of a fine geometric design placed here and there, very sparsely, worked in rich green and blue. On the long collar bands, the embroidery made intricate medallions. The coat was puffed with silk floss padding and was of unusual cut, the back hanging to a point between deep pleats. Aoi had never seen anything like it.

"Just some old thing I happened to bring along," he was saying. "It will be cold here by the water." But Aoi knew he had ordered it with careful thought for her restrained taste. She felt near tears and could not at first thank him. She felt also the first stirrings of intellect returning. He had not planned what happened last night, she was sure of that. But he had planned something, and she wanted to know what it was and the reason for it. Amusement, fatal to sentiment, gave her new clarity, not of spirit as yesterday, but of mind. Placid, full of affection, she would wait until he should tell her.

During the rest of the afternoon Aoi, with O-hana in attendance, visited the temple, watched the services, roamed the grounds, going separately from the minister but meeting

him now and then. The air was cool and Aoi put aside her old coat and wore the new purple one.

Beside the river she found a wide, flat rock starred with lichen and set near a stand of young bamboo, and she stayed there for a long time as the sky darkened, watching the water and the changing colors of the scene. O-hana stood patiently among the bamboos, nearby if she was needed but not intruding. When they returned to Aoi's room, they were met on the way by the minister.

"You have been up there by the rock? It is a peaceful place." Afterwards she realized he had said only that, and she wondered how he knew where she had walked.

It became his habit to visit her in the afternoons, and they talked comfortably and familiarly, with the curtain between them and the door a little bit open. Theirs had always been a friendship of the mind, but they had never had such freedom to talk at length.

"Don't you sometimes wonder, lady, why we go on with this dreamlike existence?" he might say, and they would spend hours telling each other of the contrasting aggravations and satisfactions of their lives, of their notions of retirement into religious peace in just such a place as this—no, in a place

smaller and more remote. Or one of them would hint at some concern for the princess and her determination to force her husband to be loving. Then the exchange of perceptions about that situation could go on as long as necessary. Not for years had Aoi enjoyed with anyone such freedom of speculation, affirmation of the truths of life, and responsive understanding. She was ravished.

And yet... it troubled her that both of them held back a final intimacy. She was preventing any opportunity for physical contact. Though trysts at temples were not unheard of, she would not allow herself to do anything that she knew she would despise afterwards. And he was not telling her why he had brought her here, was not allowing that play of deduction and surmise that had so satisfied them in the past. Though she trusted him to have a good reason, hurt and resentment could not be entirely kept down.

After a few days, she thought that he was too regular with these afternoon visits, and she suspected there was some particular reason that he arrived so soon after the midday service and left so punctually when his attendant coughed outside the door to remind him of the time. It began to seem to her that this was a signal, as if something they were hiding from her was

safely put away again. O-hana reported that the man who came was unusually small and that she had heard him called Nobumitsu. She said this to Aoi with a steady gaze, as if she were telling her something significant, but Aoi could find no meaning in it. More and more her curiosity sharpened. Why had she been brought here? What purpose was she to serve in what plan of the minister's?

She felt a greater distance opening between them. She could not decide if the loss of intimacy was a disappointment or a relief, and this made her angry with herself. Used to being an observer of the wants and needs of others and of the troubles these strains led to, had she lost the capacity to feel her own emotions? Rationally she thought it a quite impossible situation, that she should become involved with the father of the woman she served. Yet she knew that the feelings they had followed and expressed to each other had been true and honest. All this thinking bled away the pure emotion that had been so clear and proper in the beginning. She was both eased and distressed.

Just before she expected the minister to pause outside her door and enquire if he might step in for a while, Aoi stood and called to O-hana to bring the purple coat. She would walk

to the flat stone and watch the river flow. Maybe that way she could shake her restiveness before it did some damage.

O-hana came from the inner room only after Aoi had called three times for the coat. When she did come out, she took a long time bowing to the floor, her short hair bouncing around her face, which was unusually flushed. She held the old coat.

"Where were you?" Aoi asked.

"I am sorry to be so slow. I had just stepped out the back door . . ." For some reason she could not finish her explanation.

"Bring the other coat. I want to go out."

"But His Excellency will be here . . . he always comes . . ."

"Yes. And we will be out. I will see him later. Today is too nice . . ." She hoped it was nice; she had not been outside but had spent the morning brooding. Actually the room was dark and chill and she could hear wind blowing. "I do not want to waste my time here in a closed room . . ." and she added after a little grumpy thought, "... behind a curtain."

"But," said O-hana. Aoi looked sharply at her and she backed into the other room and was soon making a noise of shuffling boxes and of lids rasping on and off. She took so long that Aoi called again.

"Can't you find it?"

With great composure now, O-hana knelt once more in the doorway. "It is gone, my lady. I cannot imagine what has happened to it," and she bowed and sat serenely back on her heels.

Wanting to leave before the minister caught her, Aoi hastened to the back door, accepting the old coat, motioning that O-hana should bring shoes. O-hana paused uncertainly, then picked up Aoi's shoes from the front entrance, put them where they could be stepped into, and ran to accompany her.

The day was foul, the sky low, wind blowing roughness on the surface of the river. Aoi opened her fan, both as shield against the wind and as covering for her face. She turned toward the nearest building, which was the pagoda, climbed the steps, and stood under the eaves of the surrounding porch to get out of the wind. Already chilled, she knelt in a corner and assumed an air of meditation. O-hana would not quite come with her but stood in the open looking back and all around. What is the matter with her? Aoi thought.

Taking satisfaction from discomfort, she tried to make her mind blank. When she looked up, three men were emerging from the woods of the northeast part of the grounds, one of them struggling and led by the other two on either side, who held his

arms. Behind them came a woman wearing Aoi's purple coat.

They crossed toward the main residence hall, a dark mass of movement against pale sand; running to meet them were the streak of O-hana's blue dress and another turbulence of color; the minister. From a side path several priests rushed to help. Aoi saw all this but only as setting for the woman who looked so like herself: long hair trailing around her skirts, layers of robes in dull colors, head inclined, feet turning in as she paced her palace walk, graceful and slow. And the coat like no other coat.

While she watched, rising now to her feet, the other Lady Aoi hardened her stance, strode toward the minister, and, obscenely wrong in every gesture, greeted him with a bow full of force and ceremony. Shock, outrage, and bewilderment fell through Aoi's mind. The other Aoi was a man.

Before the enormous interest of this puzzling happening, Aoi's blurred feelings focused to pure curiosity. She watched them lead the man away, the minister turning toward her at a word from O-hana and giving her a comical gesture of dismay, desire to explain, and helplessness. He grasped the elbow of the man dressed in Aoi's coat, showed him that he

was observed, and spoke sharply, pushing him toward the guest house. The man picked up his skirts and fled.

Well. Explanations, explanations, Aoi thought when she was back in her room. I must await explanations. O-hana had come with her and was very quiet in the back room. This set Aoi to thinking.

"You knew," she said into the silent room. "Whatever this all is, you gave them the coat."

"I, my lady?" O-hana apparently sat just inside the door and out of sight.

"You did this behind my back," and impatiently, "come in here and take this curtain thing away."

O-hana edged into the room on her knees. She dragged the curtain to the side and sat so that it half-observed her. Head down, she peered around her hair, which fell to a point at her chin. "His Excellency meant to tell you."

Ah, there she had said it. He had meant to ask her help in catching this man at whatever it was he did—probably attacking women. But the whole project had gotten out of hand. She smiled, remembering. Individuality and separateness of being had registered vividly to herself that afternoon, how then was it strange for another to have seen it? And how was she not to respond to that other who

could so value what she was that only complete giving, trust, and intimacy would satisfy? By morning, his need for her to go to Kohata was far different from the kind of need it had been in the beginning, and he would not betray the feeling between them by detailing a problem with which he wanted her help.

In the end it had been only her coat he needed, she thought. Once she had appeared in such a distinctive garment—and it was a work of art, far beyond anything the palace wardrobe people usually turned out—the man who put on false hair and women's dress would be taken for Lady Aoi in her coat, and the rapist could be safely caught. The minister must have thought her extremely obliging to go all on her own the very first day to that secluded spot on the riverbank where she had sat on a white-starred rock. And after that, the other Lady Aoi—who had been Nobumitsu, the small one, employing one of his many talents—had only to appear in the same place regularly to lure the criminal.

"How can Nobumitsu . . ."

"He is a favorite at the banquets," O-hana said. "You haven't heard? He dresses up and—well, the men in the kitchen say it is quite wicked, how he can move and speak so that you would never believe he

was not a highborn lady."

"Um." Aoi's mind was by now off on another track. It would be expected that, if a woman were attacked at a temple, the criminal would be a priest. They often went bad, breaking especially their vows of chastity. Yet the captured man had been dressed in the baggy pants and short, blue-dyed coat of an ordinary worker. So there will be one element of this affair that I cannot deduce, she thought, something left for him to explain.

Dark afternoon progressed to black night. Food was delivered as usual on a tray handed in at the back door. Hearing growing noise and disturbance in the courtyard, they wondered why a crowd was gathering. Then a young novice came with the note they were expecting.

*An immodest bird,  
The plover puffs himself up.*

*Our plan has succeeded.  
But Nobumitsu fears he has  
offended you. We ask you to  
come and let us show you  
how we did it.*

The boy had a lantern on a pole, and avoiding the lights and crowd of the courtyard, he led them through a back way to the main residence hall, where Aoi found the minister waiting.



"The village people often make a dance about important incidents, and they are very excited about this. Any threat to the temple is a threat to them because they work temple fields, which are not taxed. Also, Nobumitsu would like to show you what happened. He wants you to see that he was being Woman and that he did not mock you in any way."

He led her to a place behind the blind of an anteroom. Through slivers of bamboo they looked out on a scene lit by torches stuck in the ground. Rows of priests lined the outer verandah. Musicians, already playing, were grouped to one side of the courtyard. Whole families had come to watch, and children ran between the adults. A tub of bamboo and a low black object with white stars roughly chalked on it were carried in and set in the open space.

Someone clapped for silence with two blocks of wood, and a voice rose to tell the story, drums and little gongs making rhythmic music behind it. Aoi could not understand the words because the speech of farmers was very different from that she heard in the capital. The minister moved closer to explain.

"He says she has come here to mourn her husband, who has recently died."

Aoi saw a figure approaching the firelight, her steps slow and formal. She wore the purple coat. Every line of her head and shoulders, the bend of back, the stumbling of her feet, expressed grief. Her left hand, drawn into the layers of sleeves, rose often to blot tears, as she took small steps toward the black object. The rock, Aoi thought. And yes, she sat there, lowered her fan, and turned her white face toward them, blank with sadness and distraction.

Laughter had stirred the crowd when the woman first appeared, and hisses of breath from the monks. But her attitude was so serious and dignified that they all stilled. The drums were joined by a flute soaring high, expressing the woman's grief. The narrator continued, chanting in a stylized way.

"He says she does not know that someone follows her."

With the appearance of the next figure, comments rose from the crowd. The explaining voice stopped, the drumming became heavy, the flutes shrill, as a man in farmer's clothes moved with threatening swings of his arms and high-kicking steps to part the bamboo and leer not with lust but with hate at the seated woman. The narrative continued.

"He says that this is a bad man who wanted to be a priest

but was refused because he could not pay the entrance fee. He left and worked at road-building to earn it." The man moved away from the bamboo and mimed shoveling, carrying baskets of heavy rocks and earth, and the aches in his shoulders and back. The villagers howled. He made movements of rejection, of space around him and of tucking away his rice chits. The minister said into Aoi's ear; "He lived simply and alone, as a monk would live, and saved his earnings."

Now the man softened and yearned toward an invisible person. "But there came a woman." The enactment of this scene was graphically ribald and the crowd roared and stomped. At the end, it was obvious that all the man's savings had been stolen. He then performed a violent dance of hate, ending at the tub of bamboos, glaring through the stems at the seated figure wearing Aoi's coat. He unwound a length of sacking from his waist and raised it in his two hands, sacking to muffle her cries and to make her blind.

Tension gripped Aoi. That was herself in the purple coat, alone, totally unaware that anyone meant her harm, sitting with her sorrow in the path of violence about to happen.

The man burst from behind

the bamboos, the raised cloth flapped once with a snapping sound above the head of the woman, and she looked up, straight at the blind behind which Aoi and the minister sat, letting them see the dark road she would travel from this moment and the fear that would never leave her, the shame, the guilt. As the cloth hung in the air, the woman's eyes lit and then died.

Behind her the brave rescuers who had laid this trap sprang on the man and wrestled him away, every instrument playing with vigor as they disappeared into the blackness beyond the courtyard. The people were loud with approval and glee. But the woman sat unmoving, a new knowledge in her eyes, and the cheers of the crowd died down as she rose and paced out of the light.

"After his experience with the woman, he came here to work as a gardener," the minister was saying, "thinking that, living here and keeping private vows, he could be somewhat priestly after all. You see how he has failed."

Aoi was silent. She knew that forever after that formerly innocent sound of snapping cloth would cause her to react with alarm and to see again the haunted white face of Nobumitsu playing Woman.

The minister said beside her

in the dark, "That is what could have been, if I had let you go again to the rock by the bank. You will not mind that I have protected you?"

"No. But couldn't you have explained?"

"Ah." In this one sound was all the frustration of trying to maintain romance and attend to an ugly practicality, of the loss of high intensity, and of knowing that life would go on most suitably for both of them if they let their affinity for each other be without physical expression. "Ah, but, lady . . ." he said, sure that she understood all this, and she answered, "Yes."

The head priest was coming toward them from the verandah, flanked by several other officials of the temple. "Quickly," said the minister to Aoi, "I own a small place near here. Come with me there. I want to have you to myself for a few days. We can leave immediately."

"If only we could live apart from the world," she said, and broke off to raise her fan and move a little back as the eminent priest came up to them.

"A day of great satisfaction," he said, and all his attendants murmured. "We are grateful for the help you have given us. That man will spend the rest of his life in solitary prayer here in the temple. But," he looked out at the crowded courtyard, "such confusion here now. Let us go to the river, away from all this. There is a pavilion for watching the cormorant fishers."

The clouds were opening and light from the quarter moon shone in a dappled path on the water. "Yes," Aoi said to the minister, "bring Nobumitsu and your other man and let us sit as friends do, watching the lighted boats and the shapes of diving birds."

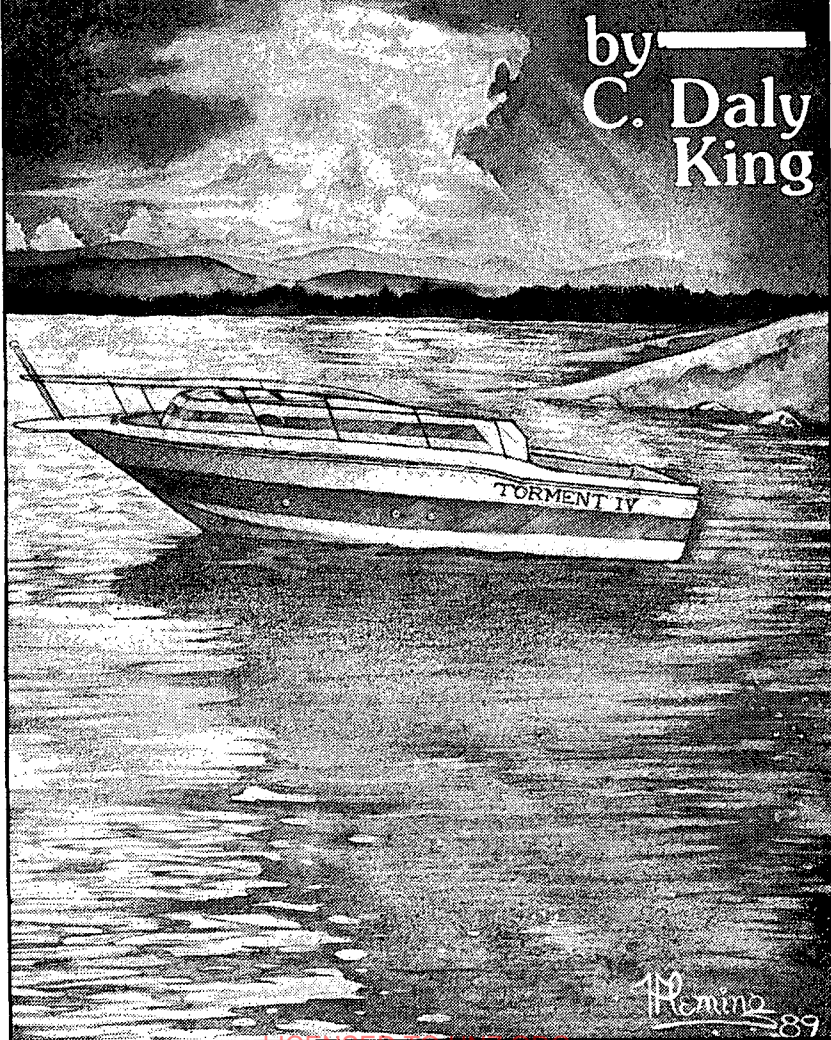
*Will there come a time  
When we can speak of plovers  
And not remember  
The river at Kohata  
And choosing a lasting way?*

The poem came into Aoi's mind. She would write it for him later, with the added question, "You do not mind a little protection?"

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# The Episode of *Torment IV*

by  
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Reming 89

Illustration by Thomas Fleming

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**W**e were driving straight towards horror. Though we didn't know it yet.

Valerie said, "*Darling*, I do hope Trevis's friend has a decent place. I want a big room, with blinds to make it dim, and none of those awful New Hampshire spiders. And I want a nice, long bath."

"Oh, I guess his place is all right. Nothing much anyone can do about New Hampshire spiders, though; they're big and nasty. But there won't be any in our room. The fellow probably has a good enough shack. Why shouldn't he?"

"Ugh! . . . Spiders." Valerie grimaced. "Yes, I suppose it'll be a good house. Trevis is rather tasteful about places himself."

We were motoring down from Canada and had arranged to pick up Tarrant at Winnespequam Lake where he had been staying with a friend named Morgan White, whom neither Valerie nor I had met. Tarrant planned to come along with us to New York a couple of days later, for White had been good enough to write, asking us to break our trip at his place for a day or so. We had gotten well along now, had passed Lancaster and were scooting through the Crawford Notch as fast as we could. It was as hot as blazes.

I said, "Another hour and a half will get us there. Then a swim, before anything else. I feel like a strip of wilted cardboard."

"I want a nice, long bath," Valerie repeated.

Ahead of us a small truck and a touring car loaded with about eighteen sweating travelers in their shirtsleeves were creeping along the hot asphalt through the center of the valley. I gave the horn some lusty digs and we swerved past them.

And that, though we didn't know it, either, was our introduction to the episode of *Torment IV*.

"The most intriguing problem I have ever heard of," said Tarrant, "is the mystery of the *Mary Celeste*. It is practically perfect."

As he spoke, he leaned back in the hammock chair and the moonlight glinted through dusk against the sharp lines of his lean, strong face. Across the water came the twinkle of little twin lights, red and green, where a motorboat, a mere shadow on the darkening lake, put out from the opposite shore.

Valerie and I had arrived, hot and tired, about five in the afternoon, and I had had a most refreshing swim. Winnespequam, as



a good many people know, is a New Hampshire lake. It is typical. Surrounded by hills, it has gathered around itself an almost unbroken line of the estates of prosperous merchants and professional men whose winter homes are in New York and Philadelphia. Some of the natives, too, boast modest bungalows nestling near the water, to which they repair during the summer months from their more permanent quarters in the little town that runs down to the northern tip of the lake. Even the motor highway that circles the shore travels chiefly between forested slopes and does little to disfigure the scene. It is a pleasant and carefree resort.

White, a big man and a good host, grunted, "Don't know it. I'm sure you do. What's the *Mary Celeste*?"

"You don't know the *Mary Celeste*?" Tarrant was plainly surprised. "Why, it's the perfect problem of all time. Dozens of people have had a whack at it, including some fairly clever ones, but it remains today as unsolved and apparently insoluble as it was sixty years ago."

He paused; then, as we were all quiet, obviously waiting for further information, he went on again. "The *Mary Celeste*, sometimes wrongly called the *Marie Celeste*, was a two hundred ton brig owned by an American called Winchester. She was picked up by the barque *Dei Gratia* one pleasant afternoon early in December, 1872, about three hundred miles west of Gibraltar. This was what was wrong about her: there was not a soul on board and she was sailing derelict on the starboard tack against a north wind that was driving her off her course. Her chronometer, her manifest, bills of lading, and register were missing. A further examination showed that a cutlass hanging in her cabin bore stains as if blood had been wiped from it; but a medical officer in Gibraltar, who subsequently analyzed these stains, declared that they were not of blood. There was a deep cut in her rail, as if made by an axe; but no axe has been mentioned as having been found aboard. On both sides of the bows a small strip, a little more than an inch wide and six or seven feet long, had recently been cut from her outer planking a few feet above the waterline; this strip was only about three-eighths of an inch deep and had no effect upon her seaworthiness. Her log had been written up to the evening of the twelfth day previous and the slate log carried to eight A.M. of the eleventh day before. In other words, the log was not up to date.

"But what was right about her was more astonishing. In the galley were the remains of a burnt-out fire above which stood the victuals for the crew's breakfast. Some of their clothes were hang-

ing upon a line to dry, and their effects were in good order and undisturbed. In the master's cabin breakfast had been partly eaten; some porridge was left in a bowl and an egg had been cut open and left standing in its holder. A bottle of cough mixture had been left on the table, its cork beside it. An harmonium stood in one corner, and in a sewing machine was a child's garment, partly sewed. None of these articles was in any way disturbed. In the first mate's quarters, moreover, was found a piece of paper with an unfinished sum upon it, just as he had put it aside when interrupted. For the eleven days during which the log had not been kept, the weather over the course from the point last noted in the log to the position where the *Mary Celeste* was found had been mild. The cargo, some casks of alcohol for Genoa, was intact and securely stowed. The boat itself was staunch in all respects, hull, masts, and rigging. There was no sign whatsoever of fire or other hazard. And last of all, the single small boat with which the brig was equipped was upon its davits, untouched and properly secured.

"Those are the facts, as evidenced by many and reliable witnesses. They make a very pretty problem . . . Of course, a good many hypotheses have been advanced. But actually not one of them is even as easy to credit as the curious state of affairs that was discovered when the *Mary Celeste* was boarded that December afternoon. . . . What could possibly have happened to make a competent crew, not to mention the captain's wife and small daughter, abandon a perfectly sound ship in fine weather, without so much as attempting to launch her boat? . . ."

There was a little silence.

"Match your mystery," White grunted. "Right here."

Tarrant twisted round in the chair. "Yes? I think you would be put to it to find another enigma with such simple and such contradictory factors."

"Judge for yourself," said our host. . . . "The Blacks. That big place just across the lake is theirs. Closed up now. They had the *Torment IV* and they were—"

Struck by his unusual expression, I interrupted. "What in heaven's name is a torment four?" I asked. "How do you mean they had it?"

"Oh, no mystery there," he assured us. "That is the name of their motorboat. Blacks have been coming up here for years, and a good many years ago now they got their first boat. Just when steam



launches were going out and gas engines coming in. Wasn't much of a boat; jerky and spasmodic, and among other essentials it lacked a self-starter. A fairly thorough nuisance, and they named it, quite properly, *Torment*.

"Presently they got another; though the second one had a self-starter it was just one more thing to be spasmodic and *Torment II* was a good name for that one also. The third was much better, really a proper boat, but by that time the name had become traditional. *Torment III* was turned in only a year ago and the new one, *Torment IV*, is a beauty; long, fast, polished up like a new dime. I was out in her early this summer; I remember at the time that *Torment* seemed a foolish title for such a beautiful piece of machinery, but now—well, I don't know."

He paused, and, "Yes, but what happened?" asked Valerie.

"All killed. Lester Black and his wife, Amelie, and their small daughter. Just like your captain and his family."

"I didn't say the captain had been killed." Tarrant's reservation came softly across from the railing.

"Touch," said White. "Wrong myself. They're dead; at least two of 'em are. Said they were killed, but I don't even know that. No one knows what actually happened to them."

The voice from the railing was plainly interested now. "Come on, Morgan, what did happen?"

"I tell you I don't know. It was really extraordinary. . . . Well, here's the story. Blacks came up early this year and so did I. It occurred about the end of June; hot spell then, if you remember, and we got it here, too. It was a beautiful, bright day and very warm for that time of year. Middle of the afternoon, *Torment IV* ran ashore a little way up the lake from here; that was the first we knew anything was wrong.

"Let me take your method and tell you what was right about her first. To begin with, her keel was hardly scratched and that came from her grounding, which happened by good luck on a strip of sand. Later, when the affair turned into a tragedy, I went over her carefully with the sheriff and there wasn't another mark or dent of any kind on her. Engine, transmission, and so on, in perfect condition—ran her back to the Blacks' dock myself after we found her. Have to tell you the cushions and pillows on the after-deck are life preservers in themselves, filled with some kind of stuff that will keep you afloat if necessary. Not one of 'em had been disturbed in any way; all present and accounted for. Not a leak, not a

single miss from the motor—nothing.

"In fact, only two items were wrong. First, one of the chairs on the afterdeck was overturned; might have happened when she ran ashore. Second, no one was in her. I know, for I saw the boat a hundred yards or so off land and watched her bump. . . . That's all."

Tarrant threw the remains of his cigar in a wide arc and, three seconds later, came a tiny *phizz* as it struck the water below. "You mean these three people simply vanished?" he demanded. "How do you know they even went out in the boat in the first place?"

"Found that out when I took the boat back. They had gone out after lunch, apparently for a joy ride. And they were drowned somewhere in the middle of the lake—two of the bodies were recovered later, Black's and his wife's; not the child's—but how or why is a complete mystery."

"But in the middle of a bright afternoon—" Tarrant began. "There were no witnesses at all? No one saw them?"

"Well, they went up to the town dock at the end of the lake and got some gas; that was established. Then they headed out again—Lester Black was running the boat—and that is the last anyone saw of them. Of course, end of June, not many people around the lake, still a bit early for the summer people. Just the same it is strange. Inquiries were made all around the lake, of course, but no one was found to throw even a glimmer on the thing."

"H'm," remarked Tarrant. "There was no obvious cause, I suppose? No trouble, financial or otherwise? An estrangement between husband and wife, something serious?"

"Not a chance," White grunted. "I wasn't an intimate friend, but I've known them for years. Man had plenty of money, lived a leisurely life, great family man, as a matter of fact. Very fond of his wife and daughter and they of him. Last thing in the world he would do, kill them and drown himself, if you've anything like that in your head."

Tarrant, meantime, had lit a cigarette and now smoked silently for some minutes. Finally he spoke. "Still, something like that is all you leave, if your other facts are right, isn't it? People don't jump out of a perfectly good motorboat in the middle of a lake for nothing. Could they swim?"

"They could all swim, though probably none of them would have been good for a mile or more. And I've told you about the life preservers, every one of them in the boat. We made

a careful check of that, naturally."

"Well, there you are. The more you say, the more it appears to have been a purposeful performance. . . . There are lots of things in people's lives that are kept pretty well hidden. . . . What happened to the boat?"

"I don't believe there was a thing in Lester Black's life that would account for that kind of tragedy," our host insisted. "Prosaic man, prosaic as hell. The boat was inherited by the Constables, cousins of the Blacks. Live next them up here, down the road a bit. They didn't use the boat for some time; didn't care to, I guess. Lately they've been taking her out once in a while. Boat's really too good to throw away."

Again there came a pause, but just as I was about to enter an opinion, Tarrant summed the matter up. "Let's see; here it is, then. Black took his wife and daughter out for a spin on a nice, clear day. First they went to the village dock and bought gas. Then they turned out into the lake once more. From the time when they left the village— By the way, when was that?"

"Between two and two thirty."

"And when did the boat come ashore?"

"Just about four o'clock."

"Then some time during that hour and a half the man and his wife went overboard and doubtless the child, too. There is no way, apparently, of fixing it closer than that?"

"No, none. Boat may have come ashore directly they were out of it or it may have cruised around for an hour or more. No one noticed it."

"The boat was entirely unharmed and, in any event, they would not have abandoned it ordinarily in the middle of the lake without the precaution of providing themselves with the life preservers so readily at hand. I'm sure there was no fire or you would have mentioned it."

"Absolutely not," White declared. "Not a trace of anything like fire. Anyhow, since it obviously didn't burn up, they would have had plenty of time to throw over *all* the preservers in that case."

I had a sudden thought. "How about some sort of fumes from the engine that might have affected all of them at once so that they were forced to jump without waiting for anything?"

White merely grunted and Tarrant's tone was quizzical. "Hardly; Jerry. In an open boat proceeding at a fair speed no fumes would get much of a chance to affect the passengers. And some mysterious

poison fumes that would make them jump instantly are simply incredible. If the engine burned ordinary gas, as it did, carbon monoxide is all that could possibly come off. So that if we grant the impossible and assume that it came through the floor instead of going out the exhaust—and then stayed near the deck—the result would surely have been to asphyxiate the people, certainly not to throw them overboard. . . . No, that's out.

"There remain, of course, several alternatives," he continued. "The first is that White threw his wife and daughter out and followed them as a suicide. That's the one you don't care for, Morgan."

"Can't see it at all. Silly."

"There are a number of reasons to account for such an action. A bitter quarrel is only one of them. There is temporary aberration, followed by remorse, for example."

"Nonsense. Still silly. You didn't know Black."

"All right, we'll reverse it. The wife hits the man over the head while he is running the boat, throws him out and then follows *him* with the child. The aberration theory fits a woman better than a man, anyhow; they are more highly strung. How about that?"

"Trevis, come off it." White seemed almost provoked by the last notion. "Aside from Amelie's being incapable of such a thing psychologically, I'll tell you why it's absurd. She was a little woman, much smaller than Black. She couldn't possibly have tossed him out *unless* she hit him first. And he hadn't been hit. The autopsies showed that neither of them had a single mark of violence on them."

Undoubtedly Tarrant was smiling in the darkness as he said, "Very well, we'll leave that theory entirely. I was only thinking abstractly, you know; no reflections intended. . . . Then we are left with one more hypothesis, the accident one."

"Ugh."

"Perhaps it's the most reasonable of all, anyhow. The child falls overboard, the mother jumps to save it, the father, who is running the boat, is the last to act. He jumps to save them both, and they are all drowned, while the boat, which in the excitement he has failed to close off, speeds away."

White answered at once. "Won't do, either. Naturally, we've been over that possibility up here. There is not merely one but three or four points against it. Altogether too many. As I said, they all knew how to swim and the daughter was about ten, not helpless in the water by any means, even with her clothes on. In the second place,

the Blacks have been aquaplaning for years; and aquaplaning behind a fast boat is no joke. Matter of fact, not even aquaplaning; they did it on water skis, much harder. The point is, if anyone had fallen over, they would naturally have followed what they have done so often when there was a spill off the skis; swung the boat about and come up to the swimmer. They were used to doing that; they could do it quickly; it was a habit. They were all used to the water, to being on it and in it; couldn't possibly have lost their heads completely over a mere tumble.

"But last and most impressive of all, I tell you that Black was a prosaic and methodical man, known for it. Supposing some real emergency—though what it could have been, God knows—supposing the wife did jump and he prepared to go after her. He would never have left his boat empty without shutting off the motor, it doesn't take an instant. Granting even that impossibility, however, it is simply beyond belief that he would have jumped to their rescue himself before throwing them at least a couple of preservers, which would reach them more quickly than he and be of as much use. You must remember that they weren't at all helpless in the water, either of them. He would surely have done that first. Then, I grant you, he *might* have gone in, just to make sure. But the theory you built won't do. . . . No, it won't. . . . Really."

"The objections are strong," Tarrant acknowledged. "Of course, I didn't know the people at all. . . . Well, that's the end of the list, so far as I can see now. You discard them all; the first as being impossible on grounds of character, the second on physical grounds, the third on grounds of habit and familiarity with the water and its hazards. I—"

For the first time during the discussion Valerie interrupted. She had been sitting quietly beyond Tarrant and smoking while the talk went on. Now she said, "May I suggest something? Perhaps it's pretty wild. . . . What about this? The parents had received some kind of threat, kidnapping or something. No, this is better: They were hailed from the shore while they were riding about and they landed. There the child actually *was* kidnapped. The parents were stricken with grief, they were quite out of their heads for a time. They went out on the lake again and presently made a suicide pact and both honored it at once. That covers it all, doesn't it? The child's body, I understood, hasn't been found."

Tarrant's chair creaked as he turned towards her and a match, flaring in his hand, showed his surprised and interested expression.

"Valerie," he said, "you have constructed the best theory yet. Really, that's very good. It covers all the facts of the case except one. So I'm afraid it won't work, but I can see that you and I are going to get on famously. It's too bad you have forgotten that one little point. Black was a well-to-do man. Kidnapping is done for ransom; and surely he would have paid a ransom as an alternative to his wife's and his own suicide. It is unreasonable to suppose that even a week's separation would cause him to choose so absurdly. The only possibility would be that the child was taken by some enemy for revenge and no return intended. That's too much like a bad shocker; I'm afraid it won't do. . . . It was a good try, though."

He rose and stretched. "I'm going to take a stroll for a bit and then turn in early. I imagine Valerie and Jerry would like to, too, after their ride." He turned and wandered slowly down the verandah.

"So you give it up?" White called after him. "No answer?"

"No. All the first answers are washed out. I'll grant you this, though, Morgan. You have a very good replica of the *Mary Celeste*; all the essential items are there. It's a problem all right; I'm not through thinking about it yet."

The matter remained in this state of suspense while we were sitting about the following morning after breakfast. The day was bright and clear but gave promise of becoming even hotter than the previous one; I was distinctly glad that Valerie and I were not to be touring the roads again.

A half hour or so later Morgan White made the suggestion that we try his tennis court, since if we delayed much longer it might well become too uncomfortable for playing. Everyone was agreeable and we trooped down to the court, which turned out to be of clay in excellent condition. "Jim Duff, the Constables' hired man, rolls it for me every other morning before he goes up to their place," White confided.

We proceeded to enjoy the fruits of Duff's labors. After several sets it was getting considerably hotter, and Valerie voted for doubles. We won, though I am not at all sure it was due entirely to our play; during the second and last set I, for one, was beginning to feel a touch weary.

Everyone agreed, at the conclusion of that set, that swimming was the form of exercise now indicated. All of us except Val were dripping. In fifteen minutes or less we had reassembled at White's

boathouse in bathing suits and stood smoking a final cigarette along the little platform by the side of the boathouse proper that covers his *Grey Falcon*. I remarked upon the diving board protruding over the water at the platform's end, and White assured us all that the lake here was seven or eight feet deep, so that diving was feasible. The afternoon before I had simply jumped off the end of his dock.

"I think I'll be trying it," I informed the rest, just as White turned to Tarrant and pointed out over the water.

"There, see that boat?" he said. "About two-thirds across the lake, heading north. That's *Torment IV*, the one we were discussing last night. Wait till I get my glasses from the boathouse and you can have a good look at her, Trevis."

He unlocked the boathouse door and disappeared inside, returning at once with a pair of binoculars which he handed over. At the moment, however, I was more interested in getting wet than seeing a motorboat. Valerie was already in the water, shouting that it was perfect and calling the rest of us sissies. "You look," I told Tarrant. "I'm for a dive." White apparently felt the same way, for upon turning the glasses over to his friend, he immediately took a header into the lake.

Thus it happened that the first intimation of excitement reached me in mid-air. I had struck the end of the board hard and it threw me high. At the top of the spring I was just touching my feet for a jackknife when Tarrant's shout came to me. "Morgan! Morgan, come here! Hurry! We must get your—" Swish into the water went my head and his words were cut off; but on the way I got an upside-down view of Tarrant holding the binoculars steadily to his eyes, his mouth suddenly grim as he called out.

Under the water I twisted back towards the dock and, reaching an arm over the platform above me, pulled myself partway up. "What ho?" I demanded.

White was already clambering up and Tarrant disappearing through the door. "The boat," he called after him. "Hurry up! How fast can we get her out?"

Tarrant's calm is proverbial, but when he wants to, he can certainly work quickly. By the time I got inside he had the slide door at the end almost up and White, dropping into the driving seat of the *Grey Falcon*, was pushing the starter button. "All clear," called Tarrant; the rat-tat-tat of the motor fell to a grind as the clutch went into reverse. Just as the boat began to back out,



Valerie jumped down onto the rear deck.

We came around in a wide circle and headed out into the lake, the motor coughing a little as it was opened full without any preliminary warning. Tarrant said, "They jumped. You'll have another tragedy unless we can get there in time."

"What is this about?" cried Valerie. "Who jumped where? Have you boys all gone crazy?" Valerie has noticed, I think, that men of Tarrant's age rather like to have her call them boys.

His voice was unpleasantly serious as he answered. "The people in that boat I was watching, this *Torment* of yours, Morgan. There were two people in her, a big man and a little one, or maybe a man and a boy—"

"Tom Constable and junior, his son, undoubtedly," White put in, without turning his head.

"Suddenly the man who was driving scrambled out of his seat and into the rear deck, where the boy was riding. He grabbed the boy's arm and immediately jumped overboard, pulling the boy with him. . . . Here, Morgan, don't follow the boat! There's no one in it. The place where they went out is almost on a direct line between your boat and that big rock on the other shore."

All of us except White were on our feet looking helplessly across the water to where, a good two miles away now, *Torment IV* was still speeding up the lake with her bow waves curving high on both sides. It gave me a queer feeling, that boat which I could just see was empty (now that I had been told), driving along as if operated by an invisible pilot. The sun was burning down, making such a glare on the lake that it was impossible to discern any small object on the surface. Such as a man's head, for example. Tarrant had the binoculars (being Tarrant, of course, he had not failed to bring them) held to his eyes with one hand, attempting to shade their glasses with the other.

"Have you got her at top speed, Morgan?" he demanded. "Best part of a mile yet to go, as I judge it."

"Everything she's got," grunted White. "Full out. Check my direction if you see anything."

"Thought I saw them a minute ago. Right together. Lost them now."

"Not good swimmers. Nowhere nearly as good as the Blacks. Doubt if they can stay up long enough."

"Oh," said Valerie, and sat down abruptly, her rubber bathing trunks making a squodging sound on a cushion. "Hurry, Mr. White. Oh, hurry!"

White said, "Agh!"

"Lost 'em," Tarrant announced definitely. "Not a sign."

Nor was there a sign when, some minutes later, we came up to the spot where, as closely as Tarrant was able to guess, the thing had happened. For five or ten minutes we floated, with the motor cut off, peering over the sides and in all directions around the *Grey Falcon*. Nothing but the calm, bright water of Winnespequam, ruffled by the lightest of breezes, met our gaze. Valerie, too, searched with the rest of us, although I could see from her expression that she wasn't very anxious to discover anything. "Of course," Tarrant pointed out, "I can't be positive as to the spot. The line is right, but the exact distance from your boathouse, Morgan, is another thing."

We began to circle slowly, in wider and wider courses.

"Any use diving?" I asked, having some vague notion that these people could possibly be brought up and resuscitated.

"No good. Deep here; take a deep-sea diver to fetch bottom. Besides, we don't know where they went down. Even if the line was right, they may have swum some distance in any direction before they gave out. . . . Not to the shore, though. They never made that."

Our search went on. But though we circled over a large area for more than two hours, not a trace did we find either of the man or of the boy. Finally, "Nothing more we can do," said White gloomily. "They sink in this lake. Didn't recover the others for three days. . . . Might as well run up towards Winnespequam and see what happened to the boat." He turned the wheel and we headed north.

Scarcely had we gone a mile when on the shore off our starboard side we saw a knot of persons gathered at the edge of the lake; and a little distance from them, what was obviously the boat we sought. I wondered, as we approached, at the unmistakable signs of excitement evidenced by the small group, for surely *Torment IV* must have grounded here nearly two hours previously.

We landed a hundred yards to the south at a disused and ramshackle dock, and made our way to the scene. An old man passed us as we drew near; he was hobbling along, shaking his head, and his mumbling reached us clearly enough—" 'Tis bewitched, she be a devil's boat."

It took us some time to discover, from the excited replies of the people we came up with, that yet a further tragedy had occurred. They interrupted each other and told the story backwards rather than forwards, but at last we pieced together the following account.

*Torment IV*, after the affair that Tarrant had witnessed, had run

ashore upon a small island so close to the town wharf that she had been seen by numerous loungers. Among these was Jim Duff, in the village on an errand, and he had at once procured another boat and been taken out to salvage that of the Constables. The latter seemed, at any rate, to possess her own luck, for neither in running afoul of the island nor in her present landing had she suffered much harm. Duff had put himself aboard and, finding all in good order, had set off towards the Constables' dock alone, after expressing his fears to his companions that some ill must have befallen his employers.

The story then passed to four fishermen who, having been almost where we now stood, had witnessed the sequel. Duff, they asserted, had been passing not far from shore on his way south when, without any evident cause, he leapt from the seat he occupied and dived overboard. No doubt he twisted the wheel as he jumped away, for turned and headed in. Two of the fishermen, however, seeing their friend struggling in the water, had immediately put out in their rowboat and gone to his rescue. Duff was a strong swimmer, accustomed to the lake since boyhood, but to their astonishment, no sooner did he note their approach than he turned and, in place of coming ashore, swam out into the lake with every appearance of panic. They were still some distance away from him when this happened and, though they made all possible efforts to overtake the man, he had sunk three times before they reached him, and he had drowned. Nevertheless, after much exertion they had been able to recover his body.

For the first time we noticed a still form, covered by one of the fishermen's blankets, lying farther up the bank among the trees.

"Have you tried resuscitation?" asked Tarrant sharply.

"More'n an hour an' a half we tried," he was told. "He be dead, he be."

White and Tarrant walked over to the body and, after sending Valerie back to the *Grey Falcon*, I followed. When I arrived, they had drawn back the blanket and were looking at the corpse. It was not a pleasant sight. I have been led to believe that persons who have drowned wear a peaceful expression but this one assuredly did not. He was a man of about forty-eight or fifty, a native New Hampshireman, bony and obviously strong. But on his face there was stamped a hideous grimace, an expression so obviously of extreme horror that it would have been essentially identical on any cast of features.

With a grunt Morgan quietly replaced the blanket. "That's him, all right; that's Jim Duff."

When we returned to the shoreline, arrangements were being made to tow *Torment IV* back to the Constables' dock. No one seemed anxious to pilot her; and I noted a bit absently that our host did not volunteer his services this time, however willing he may have been on the first occasion he had told us about. Once more in the *Grey Falcon*, we backed out on the water and steered for home. A subdued party. It was Tarrant who broke the silence after it had continued for several minutes.

"No use trying to avoid the subject," he said. "We're all thinking about it. . . . If what I saw earlier, and what has just happened here, isn't due to some form of insanity arising with the utmost suddenness, God knows what it may be."

Silence again.

White spoke this time, gruffly. "How can a boat drive people insane? Certainly not a hardboiled oldtimer like Duff."

"Could it; could it be sunstroke?" Valerie asked in a small voice. "It's awfully hot."

Tarrant admitted, "There's no question it's hot. But I don't see a sunstroke theory. None of us feels any symptoms, do we? And we have been on the lake longer than any of them were."

"But what *can* have made them do it?"

"I don't know," said Tarrant in a low tone. "I confess I don't know. . . . At first I felt that some deep cause for suicide must be operating in the Black-Constable family. What I saw surely looked like nothing so much as a determined suicide combined with murder, or perhaps a double suicide. . . . But that's out now, definitely. This man Duff could hardly be involved in such a thing and, furthermore, I don't believe for a moment that he had the least idea of doing away with himself when he started that boat down the lake."

No one had even a conjecture to add. The rest of our return was only the purring of the engine and the slap-slither of the little waves against our boat. As for me, I was completely bewildered. Here were a succession of calamities; first three persons, then two, finally one, who for no reason at all had abruptly cast themselves into the lake to drown. The last two tragedies had been amply witnessed, one by Tarrant himself through the binoculars, the other by no less than four fishermen, friends of the unfortunate man, and this time at a reasonably short range.

One must suppose, at all events, that the first disaster had been similar to its successors, a finding that scarcely did much to account for any of them. The last victim's relations with the others had certainly not been of a nature so serious as to form a bond of death. What could possibly have caused such different types of people, in broad daylight, on this peaceful lake, and plainly menaced by no danger, to jump and die? Duff's reported actions, surely, appeared to indicate that, once out of the boat, he was determined to drown. Suicide seemed absurd; and yet his actions had comported with it. Both sight and sound—for his friends had shouted at him—had combined to assure him that help was close at hand. But he had renounced all aid. Involuntarily I shook my head. It just didn't make sense.

When we landed, Tarrant made an abrupt excuse and hurried off to the house in his bathing suit. Apparently he changed with some speed, for he was nowhere to be found when the rest of us climbed the path.

He was late for dinner. We were halfway through the main course when he came in and sat down at the table. "Glad you didn't wait for me," he said, a little absently. On his forehead there still lingered the trace of the frown that always accompanies his most strenuous thinking.

"Didn't know whether you'd show up or not," White remarked in explanation. "Where have you been?"

"Looking over that boat."

"Thought so. Find anything?"

"Not a thing," answered Tarrant frankly. "That is, if you mean, as I take it you do, anything that throws light on these strange deaths."

For a time he applied himself to his meal, but when he had caught up with us at its end, he pushed back his chair and addressed us. "I examined this *Torment IV* from stem to stern. She is a beautiful boat, Morgan, no doubt about it; and she has gotten out of these mishaps herself with no more than a few dents in the bows. And a long gash coming back from the bow on one side where she careened off a rock when grounding on the island. It's above the waterline and scarcely an eighth of an inch deep. No real harm; but just another item resembling the *Mary Celeste*. You remember *she* had strips in her, running back from the bows, too. It's a strange coincidence how these circumstances match, even down to the con-

dition of the boat—so far as a motorboat *can* exhibit the same conditions as a two hundred ton brig. . . .”

In the short pause I queried, “Still, that doesn’t get us anywhere, does it?”

He agreed. “As you say. Even if we had reason to believe that the same causes were operating—since several of the same symptoms have appeared—we have no further clue, since we don’t know what could have brought about the situation on the *Mary Celeste*. And of course we have no right to assume even similar causes; a hundred to one this is merely a superficial resemblance.”

Came one of White’s grunts. “Nothing at all, eh? Nothing? What were you looking for?”

“To tell you the truth,” Tarrant confessed with a smile, “I’m afraid I was looking for some sort of mechanical arrangement. I don’t know exactly what. Something along the lines of Jerry’s idea of a poison gas, possibly. Since it obviously couldn’t come from the motor in the routine way, I considered the possibility of a small, hidden tank concealed somewhere on board. With a blower or insufflator arrangement, of course. Although I have some knowledge of gases and have never heard of one having the observed effects, it is still possible. That would at least indicate malice, murder, in fact; and we should have a reasonable background for these events. Pretty farfetched, I admit. You see to what conjectures I have been reduced by the apparently inexplicable data. . . . I have never cared much for supernatural explanations.”

“Hmph. Why ‘apparently’ inexplicable? Looks actually inexplicable to me.”

“Nothing,” said Tarrant shortly, “is actually inexplicable. That is, if you credit causation. I do. What is loosely called the ‘inexplicable’ is only the unexplained, certainly not the unexplainable. The term is quite literally a mere catchword for ignorance. That’s our present relation to the deaths; we are still ignorant of their cause.”

“Guess we’ll have to remain so this time.”

“Oh, no. After our experience today, it’s a challenge I accept.”

Something in his tone interested Valerie. She said, “I’m glad you won’t give it up. But what else can you do now, if you have already examined the boat?”

“I’ve examined the boat. Thoroughly. I even had the floorboards up; I couldn’t take the engine out but I did everything else. Had a boy go under her in the dock and he reported everything ship-

shape and just as it ought to be along the keel."

"Well, then," Val repeated, "what is left that you can do?"

Tarrant smiled. "Now I'm disappointed in you, Valerie. Surely that is obvious. There is something pretty drastic that happens to people in that boat. There is only one alternative left now. With Jerry's help I propose to find out tomorrow what it is that happens. When we know that, it may be possible for us to deal with it."

"Oh. Oh, I see. Of course. You're going out in the boat yourself." Val paused; and added suddenly, "Not with Jerry, you're not! No, I won't listen to it. I won't let Jerry go anywhere near the horrible thing!"

I expostulated. If Tarrant was willing to risk his neck, it seemed only fair that someone else should go with him. Morgan White offered to go immediately, but it appeared that Trevis preferred me for some reason.

"He won't have to go very near it, Valerie," Tarrant assured her. "I wouldn't myself permit him to come with me in the boat. I only want him to follow me at a respectful distance in the *Grey Falcon*, so that, if I jump over, he can pick me up. . . . There must be a reason why people jump."

In the end we persuaded her, though Tarrant did most of it. There are times when Valerie seems hardly to listen to *me*. He persuaded her not only to permit me to follow him but not to come along herself. As usual, he had his way.

We all went down to the boathouse after breakfast. White explained to me how to run his boat, which was simple enough; and Tarrant and I started off for the Constables' dock, leaving Valerie and our host behind. He agreed to run *Torment IV* up and down the lake opposite the boathouse, so that they could observe what happened, if anything.

On the way over, Tarrant produced the implements with which he had equipped the *Grey Falcon* earlier in the day—so as not to worry Valerie unnecessarily, he said. They made a curious collection. There was a shotgun and, somewhat redundantly, a rifle; an axe and a long rope with a lasso at its end completed his equipment.

Naturally my attention was caught by the firearms. "But what can we use those for?" I inquired curiously. "Is there someone to shoot at? But no, there wasn't anyone in the boat except the people who jumped out of it, each time. And this morning you are going alone, aren't you?"



"I don't know. I'm going alone, yes. On the other hand, there is certainly villainy of some kind here, and where there is villainy, it has been my experience that there is usually a villain. . . . I'm glad it turned out a good, hot day again."

More puzzled than ever, I said, "We threw out the sunstroke theory, didn't we? What in heaven's name has a hot day got to do with it?"

"I don't know, Jerry, honestly I don't," Tarrant grinned. "I have the haziest notion about this thing, but it is much too vague for me to tell you. So far as I know, there are only two conditions leading up to these deaths, a ride in *Torment IV* and a bright, warm day. Since I want to see duplicated whatever happens, I am glad that both conditions are fulfilled."

There was no time for more, as we had now reached the Constables' dock. Tarrant, who had taken the precaution of donning his bathing trunks, landed and was admitted to the boathouse by a man who evidently had been waiting for him. After a short delay—no doubt he was making another examination of *Torment IV*—I heard him start the motor and, a moment later, the ill-omened motorboat slid slowly out of its shelter.

The events that succeeded constituted a series of complete surprises for me, culminating in sheer amazement. He turned and headed the boat out into the lake, opening her up fairly wide, and I brought the *Grey Falcon* along in his wake as closely as I dared, constantly alert for any change of direction or other sudden action on his part. *Torment IV* had a driving seat stretching entirely across the center of the boat, and my first surprise was to observe Tarrant clamber up on this and crouch there in a most uncomfortable position as he manipulated the controls. Nothing further happened, however, and while continuing to watch carefully, I could not avoid wondering again for what purpose he had provided the weapons in my own craft.

I realized that it was foolish and yet I could think of no other type of explanation of the tragedies than a supernatural one. A ghost or ghoul? In broad daylight, on a motorboat? Even so, a shotgun isn't of much use against a ghost. But of course that was nonsense, anyhow. Even the strange coincidence of sudden, self-destructive madness on the part of these diverse people in similar circumstances was better. And again, you can't shoot madness. The rope and the axe I abandoned hopelessly.

By now we had reached the center of the lake and Tarrant mo-

tioned to me, without turning around, that he proposed to slow down. As I did so, too, I saw that he had produced a length of stout cord and was lashing *Torment IV's* wheel in such a way that the boat would continue forward in a large circle.

When he had done so, he scrambled out of the driver's seat altogether and, passing right by the rear well-deck with its comfortable chairs, gained the upper decking of the hull itself as far astern as he could get, immediately over the propeller, in fact. There he stood upright, balancing easily on both feet and intently observing the entire boat ahead of him, almost all of which was visible from his position.

And nothing happened. *Torment IV* continued to circle at a reduced speed and Tarrant continued to watch as tensely as ever. It went on for so long that I am afraid I was beginning to get a little careless. I must have been all of seventy-five yards away when suddenly I saw him stiffen, start to turn away, take one more glance forward—and dive!

I strained my eyes, but I could see no change whatsoever in his boat, which was keeping placidly on her circular course. It certainly looked as if he had seen something, but if so, it remained invisible to me. Abruptly I came to and swung the *Grey Falcon* towards where he was swimming with more speed than I had thought him capable of. Even yet I was not much concerned. Tarrant was neither a Philadelphian merchant nor a backwoodsman. Furthermore, he was a good swimmer and in his bathing suit. Accordingly my astonishment all but took my breath away entirely when, as I came up towards him, he gave a horrified glance over his shoulder and, twisting abruptly away from the *Grey Falcon*, dug his arms into the water in a panic-stricken Australian crawl!

In that moment I realized we were up against something serious. I threw in the clutch and went after him. Fortunately I could always overtake him with the motorboat I had; and I prepared to jump in for him if he showed signs of sinking. I was sure that, no matter how good a swimmer he was, he would sink before he reached Winnespequam, some eight miles away, for he was heading up the lake directly towards the town, although the nearest shore was well within a mile.

I was drawing up to him again, but this time, instead of slowing down, I sent the boat past him as closely as I dared. And as I went past, I yelled at the top of my voice, "Tarrant! For God's sake, what the hell has gotten into you!"

Evidently one of his ears was out of the water, for he hesitated and raised his head. For a moment he regarded my boat and myself without recognition, then he trod water and looked anxiously all about. I was coming about now, having been carried beyond him, and I heard his hoarse shout, "All right. I'm coming aboard."

He was literally shaking when I helped pull him over the side, and for a minute or so he merely stood in the *Grey Falcon* and gasped. Then he said suddenly, "Where is that devil's boat?" I was struck by the same expression the old man had used the day before.

"There she is," he went on. "She's getting too close in to shore. She mustn't land again!" In the chase after Tarrant I had almost forgotten *Torment IV*, but now I saw that she was, in fact, circling closer and closer to the edge of the lake.

"We shall have to get near enough, Jerry, so that I can rope that little mast on her bow," he grated. "Don't get *any* closer than you have to, though." And he added under his breath, "God, I hate to do this." Well, I gave up; in view of these unbelievable happenings it didn't seem even worthwhile asking questions. No matter what occurred, I didn't think my friend had gone mad.

I settled down to the job and soon made a parallel course with *Torment IV*. "Not so close, for God's sake!" yelled Tarrant. I eased off a little, and he threw his coiled rope. The third time he succeeded; the noose settled accurately over the small mast and he jerked it tight. "Make for the center of the lake now, Jerry. Give it all you've got; you'll have to pull the other boat out of her course. I didn't dare stop her completely for fear it wouldn't happen." As he spoke he was securing his end of the rope to a cleat, and immediately caught up the axe and took his stand above the taut line, looking anxiously along it. So that was why he had brought the axe! Apparently he foresaw the possibility of having to sever the rope even before it could be released. It was hard going, pulling against *Torment IV*'s powerful engine, but finally we were well out in the lake again. With an audible sigh of relief Tarrant brought down the axe, the rope snapped.

"Now," he said, "the rifle," retrieving it from the floor and slipping in a cartridge. It was a regulation Winchester, a heavy weapon. "Go parallel again but at least twice as far away from her," he admonished me.

When this course had been taken up to his satisfaction and we were a good hundred yards and more from *Torment IV*, he commenced firing at the empty boat. The shots crashed out over the

lake, a round dozen of them, and I saw that he was quite literally attacking the motorboat itself. A little series of spurts appeared just along its waterline as the bullets punched a neat row of holes through the hull.

"Enough, I guess," he observed, putting down the rifle and catching up the shotgun, hastily loading both chambers. We waited then, still accompanying *Torment IV* at the same distance; and shortly she began to list on the side towards us. This had the effect of straightening her course somewhat but only for a few hundred yards, for she was filling rapidly now and beginning to plough down into the water. Deliberately she settled on her starboard side until the lake poured over her rail; then with a final swirl her stern lifted a little and she went under.

But, just as she did so, something climbed up on her port side and hopped away. At the distance I couldn't see what it was, except that I should have judged it to be about two feet or more in diameter. It made a dark spot against the bright water, and it did not sink. On the contrary it scrambled over the surface and it was making directly for our boat. "Easy, Jerry," Tarrant grated, as I instinctively put on speed; "we've got to get it."

Reluctantly I swung to port in order not to catch the thing in our wake. It seemed to be coming towards us with the speed of lightning; I doubt if we could have distanced it, anyhow. Tarrant's face was white and strained, and a tremor ran over his body as he raised his gun. For a few seconds he waited, then fired. Just behind the creature the water splattered where the shot struck the lake. He had one more shot; the thing was closer now and still coming rapidly. It was so close I could begin to see it clearly—the most repulsive animal I have ever looked at. Spiders always make me creepy, but this monstrous creature with its flashing legs, its horribly hairy bulb of a body, was nauseating and worse than nauseating. There was something so horrifying about it that I very nearly jumped before it reached us. I could see, or imagined that I could, a beady, malignant eye fixed definitely upon me. If Tarrant had missed his last shot I don't know what would have happened. It's one of those things I don't let myself think about.

He didn't miss. Simultaneously with the roar of the gun, the water about it churned and the monster disappeared, blown to bits.

For the next ten minutes we drifted aimlessly. I was being sick over the side of the *Grey Falcon*.

"I think," said Tarrant that evening, "that it was some member of the *Lycosidæ* or wolf-spider species. Or else one of the larger species of *Aviculariidæ*, some of which grow to great size. Even so, I have never heard of anything as large as this having been reported. And judging from the experiences here I judge it unlikely that many observers will live to report it. Although the poisonous effects of most spider bites are exaggerated, I have a feeling that this one's bite was fatal.

"Of course I had some inkling as to what to expect. Oh, not such a spider, I couldn't guess that. Although I should have done. When I was examining the motor yesterday, I did see some heavy cobwebbing way up under the bow, but at that time I didn't think that any sort of spider could be so terrifying; I am not greatly upset by spiders myself. Just the same, reason told me that something appeared on that boat which drove people overboard in a panic. And since the motor was the only portion of it that I was unable to examine thoroughly, it was from that direction that I looked for it. That is why, as soon as I could, I lashed the wheel and got as far away from the driving seat as was possible. The heat, I believe, brought it out; not only the heat of the motor but also that of the sun pouring down on the forward deck. How it got into the driver's cockpit I don't know; the first I saw of it was when it sprang up on the back of the seat.

"I can't express the horror and loathing its appearance inspired. It was sufficient to make Jerry pretty ill—and it never got within twenty yards of him. Sheer panic, that's what one felt in its presence. When I struck the water, I had no thought of where I was going, only a hopeless conviction that I would surely be overtaken. I forgot everything, all my own preparations; and the mere swish of Jerry's boat when he first came toward me only increased my terror. That is why Duff turned away from his rescuers; in his panicstricken condition he may even have imagined that the rowboat with its oars was the beast itself. . . . Well, thank God I recovered sufficiently to get into the *Grey Falcon* and finish the job."

"Suppose there'll be no trouble about the motorboat?"

"Oh, no. I didn't see the widow, but she sent word that I could blow it up if I wished and good riddance. The loss of the boat was a small price, I think."

Valerie shuddered and reached for my hand. "Jerry," she said, "it's nice here, but take me home tomorrow, please?"

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



Illustration by Patricia Olstad

When it comes to Russian policemen as mystery protagonists, Stuart Kaminsky has Inspector Rostnikov; Reginald Hill has Inspector Lev Chisenko (*There Are No Ghosts in the Soviet Union*, 1988), and Anthony Olcott has security officer Ivan Palych Duvakin (*Murder at the Red October*, 1981; and *May Day in Magaden*, 1983). Martin Cruz Smith had Chief Homicide Inspector Arkady Renko (*Gorky Park*, 1981), at least until he was "exiled" to a fishing vessel "slime line." Arkady had been drummed out of the party and his job and committed to a mental institution for "rehabilitation" after the conclusion of *Gorky Park*, the death of his boss, and the defection of Irina. Escaping from the "hospital," he has been bumming around Siberia, moving from one menial job to another before he ends up as a second-class seaman aboard the **Polar Star**. (Random House, \$19.95, 386 pp). The ship is a factory ship serving a joint American-Russian fishing venture: American fishing boats are trawling the Bering Sea, delivering their catches to the *Polar Star* for processing and eventual sale in the Soviet Union. So when a Russian woman, a worker in the crew's galley, is pulled up in the nets of one of the American boats, there is some concern among the Soviet captain, his political officer, and a "fleet engineer" about the reception this death might receive in America and in Vladivostok. The third mate is assigned to inves-

tigate, and Arkady, because of his investigation background, is assigned to assist. *Polar Star* is not only a detective story but also a chronicle of Arkady's potential return to the living. This book boasts an excellent setting, both on board the factory ship and in the Aleut village where the crew takes shore leave, and good characterization.

Les Roberts has brought back Milan Jacovich, Cleveland private eye, in an investigation of an advertising con that went wrong when it attempted a sting on a hotel owned by the local mob kingpin. Milan accepts the job since it is only a skip-trace, after all. That is, until people involved in the sting start dying all around him. Milan, true to the code of the hardboiled private eye, perseveres, despite the albatross of his "bodyguard" and assistant, assigned to him by the mob, leisure-suited ex-con Buddy Bustamente. **Full Cleveland** (St. Martin's, \$15.95, 230 pp) proves once again that Roberts truly deserved the first St. Martin's/PWA contest award in 1986.

Frances Fyfield has provided, in **A Question of Guilt** (Pocket, \$16.95, 224 pp), an intriguing heroine in Crown Prosecutor Helen West, a "knight-in-shining-armor" in Detective Superintendent Geoffrey Bailey, some truly villainous villains in the form of Eileen Cartwright and Stanislaus Jaskowski's malevolent son, and an endearing young man who loves Helen, the unloved Peter Jaskowski. This first novel allows us to peek inside the workings of the Crown Prosecutor's office as well as inside the minds of Helen, Peter, Geoffrey, and Eileen. Perhaps more a psychological suspense novel than a mystery (we know "whodunit" from the start), this book bodes well for a West/Bailey partnership.

William Marshall has abandoned (temporarily, I hope) Yellowthread Street in Hong Kong to bring his strong sense of humor and the absurd to the streets of New York in 1883. In **New York Detective** (Mysterious Press, \$17.95, 281 pp), electricity is only just being installed in some public buildings, only a few places are "on the telephone," and the Brooklyn Bridge is about to be opened. City Detective Virgil Tillman is paired with patrolman Ned Muldoon of the Strong Arm Squad to investigate the murder of a stage doorman during the curtain calls of a "wild west" extravaganza, complete with Red Indian villains and tall blond heroes on white horses. Worth the price of the book is the first chapter, where the show onstage alternates with the description of a Master Criminal who steals money from his victims in the newly installed indoor plumbing facilities of the theater.



Falling somewhat into the "had-I-but-known" subgenre is Faye Kellerman's latest, **The Quality of Mercy** (Morrow, \$19.95, 607 pp). But it is more than that—a detective story with William Shakespeare as the detective, a historical religious story concerning the *conversos*, or "hidden" Jews, in Tudor England, and an espionage novel dealing with the smuggling of Jews out of Spain with the undercover help of Elizabeth I's personal physician, the *converso* Dr. Rodrigo Lopez. Kellerman mixes the various themes by introducing Rebecca Lopez, the doctor's daughter (who is prone to wandering the streets of London dressed as a man and who is privy to the family's smuggling enterprise), to Shakespeare, engaged to investigate the stabbing of his friend and mentor, Henry Whitman, a secret Catholic. While the intertwining of the Lopez story with Shakespeare is a little unlikely, the historical background is clearly well-researched, and the story implies that Shakespeare's Dark Lady may well have been Rebecca herself. Worth a read. *Note:* The narration in the opening chapter about the Inquisition is graphic and may be offensive to some readers.

Also in the historical category is Ray Harrison's sixth in his Sergeant Bragg and Constable Morton series. **Tincture of Death** (St. Martin's, \$15.95, 196 pp) takes us behind the scenes of the Royal Commission on opium which, in 1895, was assembled to determine whether or not opium trade and use should be outlawed. The murder of several prominent people connected with the opium trade brings the experienced Bragg and his aristocratic constable partner into the story. Permeating the story are the general attitudes of the time about art and artists, "fallen" women, and opium use and addiction.

Estelle Fox Klieger has written **The Trial of Levi Weeks or the Manhattan Well Mystery** (Academy, \$18.95, 240 pp), an account of the first recorded murder trial in the United States. Key word here is "recorded," as no doubt there were murder trials before 1800. However, Levi Weeks was arrested and charged with the murder of Gulielma Sands in the Christmas season of 1799 and was defended by both Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr; this made the trial of particular interest to the press and others, resulting in three different transcripts. Klieger has attempted to reconcile these transcripts to provide a narration of what actually happened between arrest and trial's end. What makes this book of particular interest to mystery readers is the difference then and now between murder investigations and trials.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



**M**usic Box, the latest feature film from writer Joe Eszterhas and director Costa-Gavras, is the emotional story of a Chicago lawyer who takes as a client her father, a Hungarian immigrant accused of being a war criminal. The movie centers on Ann Talbot, played with passion by Jessica Lange, the daughter who argues her father's case in Chicago's Federal Court.

Like Agatha Christie's *Witness for the Prosecution*, an acclaimed trial story brought to film in 1958 by Billy Wilder, *Music Box* has its own set of twists and turns, making it difficult from the start to determine whether the defendant is guilty or innocent.

*Music Box* is several notches above the last Eszterhas and Costa-Gavras collaboration, *Betrayed* (reviewed in the Mid-December, 1988, AHMM). It is

more believable, and more spellbinding.

A good portion of the film takes place in the courtroom, and when it ventures outside those not-so-friendly confines, it doesn't stray far from the question at hand—did Mike “Mishka” Laszlo (Armin Mueller-Stahl), as a member of the Nazi-allied Hungarian secret police during World War II, commit heinous crimes?

Any daughter would be hard-pressed to believe such things about her own father, who is in this case a loving grandfather to his namesake, her eleven-year-old son Mikey (Lukas Haas). But as the trial progresses, even she begins to have her doubts.

Talbot's defense strategy is reminiscent of that of the real-life trial of retired U.S. auto worker John Demjanjuk, also accused of war crimes. She, like Demjanjuk's defenders, tries to

discredit the witnesses and the documents presented as evidence. The documents are forgeries, she says, and the witnesses are doing the bidding of the Communist regime in Hungary.

But the prosecution's case seems almost airtight. After a government forensics expert testifies to the veracity of a photostat of Mishka Laszlo's identification card for membership in the wartime Special Section or Arrow Guard—the secret police—the prosecution brings out its big guns.

In the most powerful scenes of the movie, elderly witnesses flown in from Hungary tell stories, each more horrible than the one before. Each picks the defendant, Laszlo, as the brutal Mishka, who committed unspeakable crimes. Only these people do speak of them, telling tales of brutality which bring tears even to the eyes of counselor Talbot.

In the stories of each witness are common threads—a man called Mishka, another man with a long scar on his face, similar methods of torture and killing. Each fingers Laszlo as a leader of the brutal secret police.

The question of guilt versus innocence makes this a suspenseful film—we don't know what the truth is for much of the picture. But a certain tension is added because the viewer

cannot even be sure if he wants the defendant to be found guilty or acquitted. If he is found guilty, we must feel for his daughter and grandson and for all his victims. If he is set free, there will have been a great miscarriage of justice in accusing this poor old widower of horrible crimes which he did not commit. These unanswered questions leave the viewer on the edge of his seat.

To the film's credit, it does not resort to graphic flashback scenes to garner easy support for the prosecution's side. Instead it sticks to spoken testimony, which in this case is striking and probably more effective.

The defense picks up needed steam when Talbot turns to her ex-father-in-law, Harry Talbot (Donald Moffat), a blue-blooded attorney who worked for American Intelligence in post-war Europe. This man, who wined and dined Nazis in order to gather intelligence about the Russians, will dig wherever he has to for skeletons. With his contacts in the intelligence community, he doesn't have to look far.

The movie takes another exciting twist thousands of miles from the courtroom. The story never wanders off its course, however. The threads are pulled together for the viewer, whether he likes it or not. The case snowballs to its resolution.

# THE STORY THAT WON



The December Mysterious by Edith Magee of St. Paul, tions go to Don Shaffer of Ditoro of Coraopolis, Pennsylv-Canada, California; Barbara Maryland; Gerry Griffiths of June Bower of Tampa, Florida; Ronald Charles Nesbitt of Orange, California; and Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia.

Photograph contest was won Minnesota. Honorable men-Belmont, California; Mark L. vania; Robert Baldwin of La L. Goldsmith of Baltimore, San Jose, California; Carmia

## SEE MARY by Edith Magee

See Mary.

Mary is taking pretty pictures.

Mary is also holding her camera backwards, which isn't too important because there isn't any film in it anyway.

Poor Mary. All her life people have told her God must've shorted her about five bricks out of a full load. Mary figures that was a dirty trick and would like to get even.

See Dougie Burpschietz, eighteen, electronics whiz, creep.

Dougie has hidden a transmitter behind Mary's bench and has been waiting for the perfect victim. He figures Mary, with her shoes on the wrong feet and enormous shopping bag at her side, is it.

Dougie speaks into the transmitter: "This is the voice of God; if you can hear me, raise your hand."

Hesitantly, Mary raises her hand, heart pounding. Could this be her big chance?

"I have a message for you," intones Dougie.

"I have one for you too, Lord," says Mary.

"Come to the other side of the statue."

Mary drops her camera and tightens her grip on the shopping bag. Rounding the statue's base, she sees the Almighty. He whips open His windbreaker to reveal a T-shirt imprinted with the word "Sücker!" Mary, not expecting anything better, hardly pauses in her stride and with a mighty swing belts God upside the head with her bag.

See Dougie hit the pavement with a thud.

See Mary stroll away smiling, the score settled, five bricks resting cosily on the bottom of her bag.

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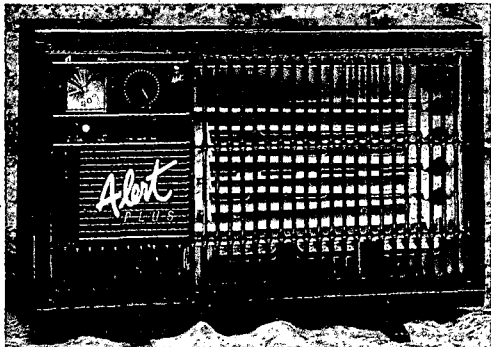
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The National Child Safety Council has also endorsed the Arvin Alert Heaters. You'll have all the comfort of this 1250/1500 watt fan-forced radiant heater, with automatic thermostat for constant temperature. And you'll feel secure about its many safety features. A thermal limiter works to prevent overheating, backed up by an audible alarm plus alert light if the unit reaches an unsafe heat zone. The same alarm and light warn you if the heater overturns (even though its stable legs make that unlikely) and a tipover switch *automatically* turns it off. The brand-new Arvin Alert Plus features an analog clock with nightlight and, perhaps best of all, a 12-hour shut-off timer. Set the dial (like a kitchen timer) and fall asleep in a warm room — worry-free. Perfect for the forgetful: Seniors and anyone who has ever dashed out of the house, only to drive back miles to check a heater. U.L. listed. 12½"x18¾"x9¼" deep. **\$79.98** (\$10.00) #1875X.



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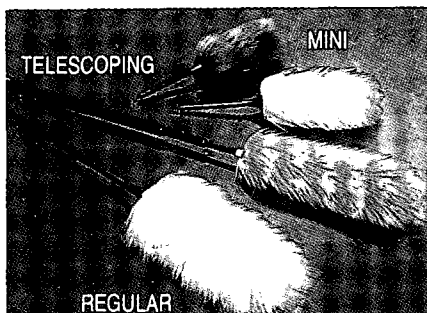
## ▼ YOUR FACE WILL THINK YOU'VE BEEN TO A LUXURY SPA

Some of the world's most famous professional salons rely on the deep-cleaning and rejuvenating effects of facial steaming. Accomplishing it at home has meant leaning over a stove under a towel tent — and who can be bothered? Now, there's the Episauna — just fill with tap water, plug in, flip up the hood to a comfortable angle and enjoy the warm, soothing mist. Tense facial muscles relax, nature's own perspiration system is stimulated to open and clean pores; built-up cosmetics and grime disappear. Use with your favorite cream and see its effects multiplied — dry, even over-sunned or chapped skin — can benefit. With hood flipped down, Episauna is just 3½" tall, for easy storing or packing: U.L. listed, doubles as a vaporizer/inhaler for nasal congestion. **\$39.98** (\$4.00) #A1862.



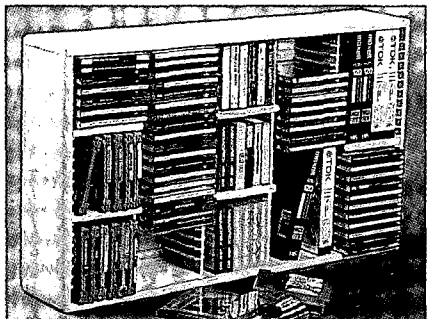
## ▼ DUST MAGNETS

Lambswool contains a natural static charge that makes dust literally leap off surfaces. Our dusters are imported from England. They are the fluffiest, highest quality lambswool in the world! We offer a set of four lambswool dusters: our 27" duster, our telescoping duster which extends to more than four feet—lets you reach high corners, top shelves, overhead lights and collapses to 28", and two mini dusters. **\$22.98** (\$4.00) #A1870.

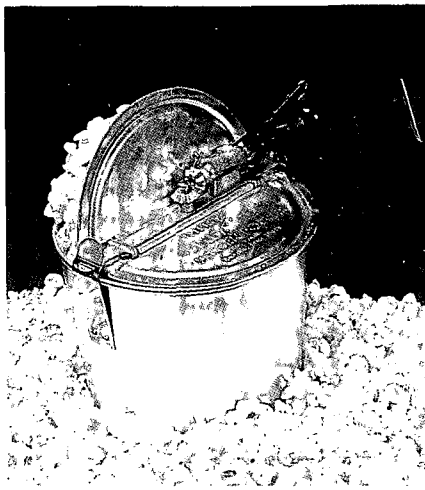


## ▼ OAK CD/CASSETTE STORAGE UNIT

Collections of C.D.'s and/or cassettes can present a storage problem for audio/video enthusiasts. But now, Cal Oak products solves the problem with its beautiful storage units. Constructed in the USA of solid California black oak, each unit houses approximately 100 cassettes. By using the solid oak dividers, you can increase C.D. capacity to over 160. Stores video tapes or video game cartridges. Beautifully crafted the storage unit will add an elegant touch to any room. **\$79.98** (\$12.00) #A1947.



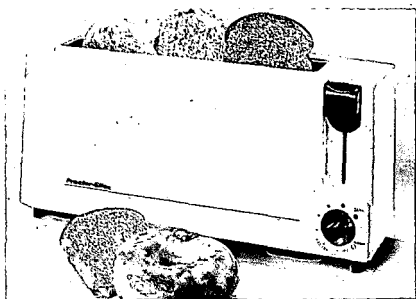
## ▼ GOURMET POPCORN POPPER



All new high temperature 6 qt. popcorn popper. Most electric and hot-air poppers "puff" the corn more than they "pop" it, leaving it tough with hard centers. This flat-bottomed stove-top popper reaches 475° and pops full in two minutes with 6 quarts of the best popcorn you ever tasted. Stirring paddle with through-the-crank handle virtually eliminates burnt or unpopped kernels. Wooden handle for safe grip, two dump lids. Pop without oil for delicious diet popcorn. 370 calories per 6 qt. bowl. Produce tender, fluffy, old fashioned movie theater popcorn with the Detonator™ popper. Made in the USA. **\$24.98** (\$5.00) #A1950.

**TO ORDER:** Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in ( ) payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL**, Dept. 040 HK; P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, NJ, 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-365-8493**. NJ residents add 6% sales tax. We honor MasterCard/Visa. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, C.O.D. orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund. Allow 30 days for delivery.  
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# MAIL ☆ ORDER ☆ MALL



## ◁ PROCTOR-SILEX TOASTER (FOR PERFECT TOAST)

Tired of bagels, muffins and large bread slices not fitting in your toaster? Try this extra-long, extra-wide toaster that automatically adjusts to evenly toast any thickness. Tamper-proof crumb catcher empties with just a tilt. Sleek design fits any kitchen decor. 1050 watts, yet cool to touch. 14" W x 4" D x 6½" H. **\$56.98** (\$5.00) #A1900.

## ▽ CAR-THEFT PROTECTION — WITH NO INSTALLATION

With Sonic Sentry, the value of a car alarm brings you peace of mind — without the expense and bother of installation. You can switch it from one vehicle to another. Just plug Sonic Sentry into the cigarette lighter; cord reaches 5 feet, so the unit can occupy dash or seat when vehicle is parked, where the flashing lights can make a browsing thief think twice. The petite 4½"x4¼"x2" box is capable of emitting a truly ear-piercing alarm, concentrated inside the car, where it can most effectively repel an intruder. Activated by the light that accompanies the opening of car door, hood or trunk, it also senses impact or "unnecessary roughness"; the shriek lasts for one minute and only the key stops it — unplugging the lighter ac-



tivates a back-up battery. Stuck on the road? Switch Sonic Sentry to its mode showing HELP in flashing red lights and put in the window to attract aid. It's protection you can't afford not to have, at **\$85.98** (\$7.00), #A1899.

## CALL TOLL FREE

# 1-800-365-8493

CUSTOMER SERVICE CALL 201-367-2900

**30 Day Money Back Guarantee For  
Exchange or Refund.**

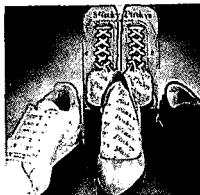
## WE ACCEPT MASTERCARD/VISA

If ordering by mail send remittance to **MAIL ORDER MALL**, Dept. 040 HK, P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701. Item price is followed by shipping and handling in ( ). Be sure to add both together to arrive at total price. N.J. residents add 6% sales tax. When using credit card — include account number, exp. date, signature. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign or C.O.D. orders.

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## ▽ STINKY PINKYS



Just put a Stinky Pinky "sock" in each shoe and overnight odor is gone, absorbed by the special blend of all natural earth materials. Works in running shoes, sneakers, boots, leather shoes, anything that goes on your feet. And keeps on working, too—just put Stinky Pinkys out in the sun for a day every three months or so to restore their odor-catching ability. Three pairs of Stinky Pinkys, enough for 6 shoes or boots, costs **\$19.98** (\$4.00) #13263.